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The National Center for Rehabilitative Auditory Research
Hearing Loss

Hearing loss and tinnitus affects millions of Americans, including a significant number of individual who are over age 65. Among the possible causes are allergies, infections, drugs, exposure to noise, genetics, or simply age. Conductive hearing loss (loss due to damage to the eardrum and middle ear structures) can often be reversed through surgery or medication. Sensorineural hearing loss (caused by damage to the inner ear and auditory nerve) is permanent, but can often be helped through the use of hearing aids.

Because hearing loss is the single most common individual disability in the veteran population and tinnitus is the third most common, VA scientists, engineers and clinicians are studying ways to prevent, diagnose and treat hearing loss by addressing a wide range of technological, medical, rehabilitative and social issues.

Statistics

- More than 800,000 veterans receive disability compensation for service-connected hearing disability (e.g., defective hearing, tinnitus, hearing loss or impairment). (From VA statistics.)
- Another 1.5 million, who do not qualify for compensation, are eligible for treatment through the VA Medical Center. (From VA statistics.)
- Hearing loss is greater in men.¹
- Almost 12 percent of men who are 65 to 74 years of age are affected by tinnitus. Tinnitus is identified more frequently in Caucasian individuals and the prevalence of tinnitus is almost twice as frequent in the South as in the Northeast.¹
- Only 1 out of 5 people who could benefit from a hearing aid actually wears one.¹
- The number of Americans with a hearing loss has doubled during the past 30 years.²
- Approximately 31.5 million people report a hearing difficulty; around 10% of the U.S. population.³
- 3 in 10 people over age 60 have hearing loss.³
- 1 in 6 baby boomers (ages 41-59), or 14.6%, have a hearing problem.³
- 1 in 14 Generation Xers (ages 29-40), or 7.4%, already have hearing loss.³

Research

In 1997, the Department of Veterans Affairs established the National Center for Rehabilitative Auditory Research to study hearing problems, primarily in veterans, and develop treatments that will help all people. The Center strives to alleviate communication, social and economic problems resulting from hearing loss and tinnitus.

Its areas of research include:

- Ototoxicity (e.g., evaluating devices and other methods of early detection)
- Auditory function related to various diseases or conditions(e.g., diabetes, multiple sclerosis)
- Relationships between damage to hearing by noise and speech perception
- Improvements in speech recognition in noise by hearing-impaired people
- Combined effects of aging and noise damage on hearing loss
- Effects of dual-sensory loss (hearing and vision) on speech recognition
- Tinnitus measurement and treatment
- Psychosocial aspects of hearing (including hearing aid use)

Facts

- Most individuals are exposed to harmful sounds at some point in their lives, causing sensitive structures of their inner ear to be damaged. This type of hearing loss – whether caused by a one-time exposure to a very loud sound, or repeated exposure to various loud sounds – is called noise-induced hearing loss.
- Noise induced hearing loss is often preventable.
- Hearing aids do not restore hearing to normal, but they do help to amplify what sound an individual can hear.

Sources for Information:

<http://www.ncrar.research.va.gov>

¹ <http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/hearing/noise.asp>

<http://www.ata.org>

²<http://www.asha.org/public/hearing/>

³<http://www.betterhearing.org/>

<http://www.audiology.org/consumer/>

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