

Facts about Hearing Loss

Providers

Communication barriers compromise patients' safety and ability to make informed decisions effecting their overall health and well-being.

Communication needs and preferences vary greatly among people who are hard of hearing or deaf. These are general guidelines; however, case-by-case assessments are required for providing patient-centered care.

Note: "Hearing loss" is a general term and often includes people who were born deaf or hard of hearing as well as those individuals who experienced hearing loss any time after birth. Many deaf and hard of hearing people who communicate primarily in a signed language, identify as being members of a community or linguistic minority, not as having a disability.

This Guide focuses mainly on the communication needs and services of non-signing hard of hearing or deaf patients, family members, or caregivers. However, the legal rights to effective communication and considerations are consistent for all.

Hearing loss is a major public health issue; it is the third most common physical condition after arthritis and heart disease. It is not only a medical condition or diagnosis; more importantly, it is a communication and psychosocial issue.

Demographics

- Approximately 48 million people report some degree of hearing loss.
- Four out of five Americans with hearing loss do not wear a hearing aid.
- 18% of adults 45-64 years old have hearing loss.
- At age 65, one out of three people has hearing loss.
- 47% of adults 75 years or older have hearing loss.
- Tinnitus (ringing in the ears) affects 50 million people in the United States.
- 30 children per 1,000 have hearing loss.
- 1 in 5 teenagers has hearing loss.
- 60% of veterans who serve in combat experience noise-induced hearing loss; hearing loss and tinnitus are the most common service-related disabilities.
- Reports indicate hearing screening in primary care is uncommon, occurring during approximately 17-30% of patient visits.

Recognizing Patients Who Are Hard of Hearing or Deaf

Patients may not always disclose they have hearing loss. This may be due to denial, stigma, or fear of being treated differently. Rather than focus on the hearing loss, it is imperative to address the communication needs of the patient.

Here are some common indications a patient may be hard of hearing or deaf:

The patient:

- Often asks for statements or questions to be repeated
- Often misunderstands conversations and information, especially in noisy or busy environments
- Has difficulty understanding when they cannot see the speaker's face
- Turns one ear towards the person speaking or cups a hand behind an ear
- Speaks loudly
- Complains people are mumbling
- Has difficulty understanding on the telephone

Being Hard of Hearing or Deaf May:

- Compromise awareness and safety
- Increase fatigue, tension, irritability, and stress
- Decrease patient's ability to process, retain, and act on information
- Impact other health and safety issues such as falls, cognitive decline, and dementia
- Contribute to low self-esteem
- Cause patient to feel marginalized
- Create or increase a sense of isolation
- Increase patient's risk for depression
- Adversely affect overall quality of life