



# What's That You Say? Hearing Problems in Older Adults

*This article is based on information from [What's That You Say? Engaging In Person and Virtually with Older Adults](#), a sessions at the American Society of Consultant Pharmacists' 2025 Annual Meeting.*

Hearing loss is not uncommon in older adults, but it affects more than their ability to hear. It makes it difficult to socialize and engage with others, understand information, and participate in everyday life. At the “What’s That You Say? Engaging in Person and Virtually with Older Adults” session at the recent ASCP meeting, the presenters talked about the challenges of hearing loss and how pharmacists can help seniors hear and communicate better.

## **Hearing Loss: More Than Just Turning Up the Volume**

More than half of people over the age of 71 have some hearing loss. That figure soars to 96% in those over age 90. The most common hearing problems are presbycusis (gradual bilateral hearing loss at high frequencies), difficulty discriminating between sounds, reduced ability to process rapid speech, and difficulty filtering out background noise.

There are three types of hearing loss:

- **Conductive hearing loss**, which happens when sound can't move easily through the outer ear canal to the eardrum. It makes sounds softer but can often be corrected medically or surgically. Hearing aids may help.
- **Sensorineural hearing loss** occurs when there is damage to the inner ear, or cochlea, or to the nerve pathways from the inner ear to the brain. This type of hearing loss is permanent and usually cannot be corrected medically or surgically.
- **Mixed hearing loss**, a combination of conductive and sensorineural issues.

A related issue many people experience is tinnitus, a ringing, buzzing, humming, or roaring sound in the ear. Tinnitus is often associated with hearing loss, noise exposure, or ototoxic medications and may be temporary or chronic. Tinnitus can affect sleep, concentration, and mood.

# What's That You Say? Hearing Problems in Older Adults, Cont.

## Support and Solutions

The most common hearing loss solution is a hearing aid, of which there are several types:

- Behind the ear (BTE)
- Receiver in canal (RIC)
- In the ear (ITE)
- In the canal (ITC)
- Completely in canal (CIC)

There also are bone-anchored hearing aids, which are useful for conductive or mixed hearing loss. These transmit sound as vibrations directly to the cochlea. Cochlear implants may be used for moderate to severe hearing loss when hearing aids are insufficient. These devices convert sound into digital signals that stimulate hearing nerves.

Some people prefer to use personal sound amplification devices that help make it easier to hear in settings such as restaurants or movie theaters. These are short-term solutions, available over the counter or through audiologists, that are not FDA-regulated. A more recent innovation is the Apple AirPods Pro 2 Earbuds, which received FDA approval in 2024 as the first over-the-counter hearing aid software useful for mild to moderate hearing loss.

For tinnitus, treatments include earwax removal, hearing aids, or medication changes. Other common interventions may include the use of a white noise machine or masking device to ease the symptoms. There are also counseling options. Tinnitus retraining therapy (TRT), usually administered by an audiologist, combines sound masking and counseling. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) may also be used to help a person with tinnitus cope with their symptoms and manage related anxiety and/or depression.

## Communication Breakdown

The presenters also discussed the potential effects of hearing loss on everyday life:

- Conversations become difficult, especially in noisy places
- Repeatedly mishearing others leads to frustration
- Many older adults begin to avoid social situations altogether
- Misinterpretation leads to social and business problems, misunderstandings, and conflicts
- Untreated hearing loss is linked to dementia, falls and injuries, and accelerated memory loss and confusion

They emphasized the importance of addressing hearing loss to halt this cascade of issues, improving safety, cognition, and quality of life.

Strategies to better communicate with people who have hearing loss include:

- Slowing your rate of speech and pausing to give the listener time to process what you are saying
- Speaking in a lower pitch (instead of talking louder)
- Using a quiet area for communication
- Enunciating clearly
- Speaking face to face to support the ability for lip reading
- Ensuring the person is wearing hearing aids or has an amplifier
- Particularly in health care situations, ensuring that a family member is present if there is concern that the patient cannot hear or understand what is being discussed

“Hearing plays a very important role in total communications.”

- John Derr, RPh, FASCP,  
FHIMSS

# What's That You Say? Hearing Problems in Older Adults, Cont.

## Pharmacists Can Aid Hearing

Because several medications are known to be ototoxic, meaning they can cause or contribute to hearing loss, the pharmacist can play a key role, particularly with older adults in senior living or long-term care settings. The most common ototoxic [medications](#) include:

- Over the counter pain relievers (aspirin, NSAIDs, and acetaminophen). Research suggests that these can contribute both to hearing loss and tinnitus, particularly when used two or more days a week.
- Aminoglycoside antibiotics
- Loop diuretics and water pills
- Chemotherapy medications such as cisplatin, carboplatin, and oxaliplatin
- Opioids and narcotic pain medications
- Erectile dysfunction medications (sildenafil, tadalafil, vardenafil, and avanafil)
- Anti-malaria and autoimmune drugs (quinine, chloroquine, and hydroxychloroquine)

How medications impact hearing may depend on several factors, including dosages and treatment duration, pre-existing hearing conditions or issues, polypharmacy involving multiple ototoxic drugs, genetic predisposition, and environmental factors such as excessive noise.

The pharmacist also can educate people about ear care, such as:

- Keeping ears dry by wearing ear plugs when swimming
- Not using cotton swabs to clean the ear canal
- Wearing ear plugs when around loud noises
- Turning down the volume when using headphones/earbuds
- Visiting a health care provider for routine ear exams and seeking help promptly if any hearing loss is noticed

To sum up the session, presenter John Derr, RPh, FASCP, FHIMSS, said, "Hearing plays a very important role in total communications." He emphasized that pharmacists often have frequent engagement with older adults, and they should be aware of the possibility of hearing impairment when communicating with seniors. Furthermore, when conducting medication reviews, these professionals should be on the lookout for any ototoxic drugs that can be changed or removed.