

FAQs: World Hearing Day, Hearing, Hearing Loss and Audiologists



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WORLD HEARING DAY

What is World Hearing Day?

Held annually on 3 March, World Hearing Day is a global awareness campaign led by the World Health Organization (WHO) to highlight the importance and value of hearing healthcare and the need to protect hearing throughout the course of our lives.

The 2023 World Hearing Day theme is **'Ear and hearing care for all! Let's make it a reality'**. The day highlights the importance of integrating ear and hearing care within primary healthcare, to increase access and make it quicker and cheaper to access audiology and other hearing health services.

You can help us spread the message and build awareness of the value and importance of hearing health and protecting our ears by following us on social media.

How does integrating ear and hearing care within healthcare benefit me?

In healthcare, there are several categories of care providers. *Primary care* providers refer to the first professionals you see if you had a health concern, for example GPs, pharmacists, and audiologists. *Secondary care* refers to specialists you'd be referred to by a primary care provider. And so on.

Australia's healthcare system has been historically fragmented within and between healthcare categories, with each care provider focused only on treating your individual hearing health concern. An integrated healthcare system, which Australia is moving towards, means your care providers would work more closely together to treat your hearing holistically across different stages of your life.

In this system, you can expect each of your care providers to share knowledge more readily, increasing each provider's familiarity with ear and hearing care. This would fast-track the time it would take for you to be diagnosed and treated for a hearing issue.

What policies are in development right now?

Medical Benefits Schedule

From 1 March 2023, the Federal Government is implementing changes to the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS).

A key component of the new changes is widening the scope to allow *any* medical practitioner to refer a patient to an audiologist when this was previously restricted to a select few.

This reduces the number of referrals you need to receive audiological assessments and treatment and better support your ear and hearing care, saving you time and money. The changes particularly support the provision of audiological services to people in regional and remote areas and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, who do not have frequent access to healthcare.

Other changes to the MBS include allowing more young people with complex neurological disorders, such as a child or young person with autism to access allied health services at a subsidised cost. The changes increase the number of allied health assessments or treatments covered by Medicare from four to eight services, and increase the age limit of eligible patients from 13 to 25 years of age.

Free Interpreting Services

If you are from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, or know someone who is, you can now access a free interpreter at select locations around Australia when you book to see an audiologist.

The changes to the Government's Free Interpreting Service allow an interpreter to join you by phone, video call or even in-person during your audiology appointment. The interpreter can assist your audiologist to accurately convey information and reduce any confusion.

The service includes access to interpreters in 150 languages, including Mandarin, Hindi, Spanish, Vietnamese and Thai.

Each of these new policy changes acknowledge audiologists as integral partners in the healthcare system and the essential role audiologists play in preventing, assessing, treating and rehabilitating someone with a hearing or balance disorder.

HEARING

How do we hear?

Our ears work with our brain using a delicate system to transport sound waves through the outer, middle, and inner ear and process and transform sound signals into the things we hear.

Sound waves travel down our ear canal where they are vibrated through the ear drum. The sound is then conducted by the smallest bones in the body – the hammer, anvil and stirrup – into the cochlea in the inner ear where tiny hairs perfectly tuned to specific pitches transform the sound into signals that are sent along the hearing nerve to our brain. Our brain then helps us process and understand these signals as the things we hear.

Does hearing care just relate to hearing loss?

No, while hearing loss is most often associated with hearing care and it is very important to manage and treat, there are many other hearing conditions that you should be aware of.

Hearing care may also include diagnosis, treatment and management of conditions including:

- Tinnitus – where someone experiences a regular ringing, buzzing or humming in their ears without the presence of an external source.
- Vestibular disorders – where someone’s vestibular system, which helps maintain balance, is damaged, manifesting in symptoms of dizziness and balance issues.
- Auditory Processing Disorder – a condition which disrupts how the brain understands what we are hearing. Symptoms may include difficulty following speech in noisy environments, difficulty following auditory instructions, and literacy, or general academic development issues.

HEARING LOSS

What happens when our hearing is damaged by exposure to sound?

When we are exposed to loud noise, particularly over a long period of time, the tiny hair cells that send sound signals to the brain are overworked. This causes these hairs to die reducing our ability to hear and process certain pitches of noise. There is no way to repair this damage to the hair cells so hearing loss is permanent.

How common is hearing loss in Australia?

1 in 7 Australians have hearing loss with the rate expected to double by 2060, many of those diagnosed have loud sound induced damage. Your likelihood of having hearing loss increases with age. Around 5% of children in Australia are affected by hearing loss with that number rising to over 74% of adults over 70. This is often due to the ageing process as well as exposure to loud sounds.

What are the impacts of hearing loss?

Undetected hearing loss can have a significant impact on wellbeing and quality of life, reducing employment, education and social outcomes.

It can stop people doing things they love because they can't easily communicate and connect with others, find it difficult to participate in noisy environments and avoid many situations out of fear and embarrassment about not being able to hear.

Changes to hearing and onset of conditions such as tinnitus can cause significant distress that may lead to mental health issues.

How can I protect my hearing?

Sound is everywhere in our lives, as we connect to the people around us, enjoy things we love such as music and get the job done. While we can't avoid sound, we do need to be careful. Once you lose your hearing you can't get it back and while hearing aids and other devices can be useful in correcting hearing loss, they cannot replicate natural hearing.

Some easy ways to protect your hearing are:

- Use protection – if the sound source is connected to power (for example a cord or battery) or you feel uncomfortable, wear protection such as class 4 or above earmuffs or earplugs.
- Be aware – know how loud sound is and how long and frequently you are exposed.
- Turn it down – a good rule is If you are listening to music through ear buds or headphones and other people can hear it, it's too loud. Keep volume at a safe level.
- Take a break – make sure you embrace the quiet and give your ears a break.
- Be aware of changes – if you do notice ringing or sounds in your ears or changes to how you hear, get a hearing assessment and health check to pick up changes early.

AUDIOLOGISTS

What does an Audiologist do?

Audiologists are highly skilled and trained hearing health professionals who provide advice, treatment, education, and interventions for people with hearing, communication, and balance problems. They can work closely with other health professions and in a wide variety of health and education settings.

Audiologists:

- Conduct diagnostic hearing and balance assessments.
- Develop and implement personalised rehabilitation and treatment programs, including working holistically with a broader health team to manage hearing health needs.
- Provide counselling and rehabilitation for clients with tinnitus to help them adjust to the condition and improve their quality of life.
- Prescribe, fit, and program hearing aids, implants and assistive listening technology systems.
- Work with educators in schools and classrooms to maximise listening environments and support for children with hearing needs.
- Design, implement and supervise hearing health programs such as newborn screening programs.

When should I see an audiologist?

As well as assessing your hearing health, audiologists can provide advice on protecting your hearing and managing risks. Regular hearing health checks can help pick up changes early.

You should consider seeing an audiologist for an assessment if:

- You have ringing or sounds in your ears (tinnitus).
- You are experiencing increasing difficulty understanding and following speech in noisy environment such as when you are out to dinner, in a café or communicating in a noisy, crowded environment.
- You notice you are increasing the volume of the television, your phone or personal listening devices.
- You find yourself avoiding certain situations or activities because it is difficult to hear, for example making phone calls, drive-through take-away, going to the movies.
- You can't hear high-pitched sounds such as doorbells, alarms or birds singing.

You can search for an audiologist using the Find an Audiologist tool at [audiology.asn.au](https://www.audiology.asn.au).