

Our ability to hear the sounds around us is of concern to us all. Laura Brodsky, MS, CCC-A is a Certified Clinical Audiologist practicing at the Community Care Physicians Audiology Center located in the Capital Region Health Park in Latham, NY and at the Community Care Physicians Delmar Medical Office Audiology Center. (518-783-3110). Ms. Brodsky has extensive background in helping to meet the needs of hearing impaired people of all ages. Below she answers some frequently asked questions about hearing health and hearing aids.

Question: How do I know if I need a hearing aid?

Answer: Before you decide to try a hearing aid you should consult with your family doctor to check your ears. If no obvious medical condition is noted, your doctor may refer you to an Audiologist for a complete audiological evaluation (hearing exam) and, if indicated, a hearing aid evaluation.

Most people with hearing loss can be helped and their quality of life improved, by a hearing aid. A hearing aid enhances the specific sounds you're missing and amplifies them so that they're made audible to you. New programmable or digital hearing aids can actually differentiate between soft and loud sounds and amplify them differently. Some have special microphones that amplify the sounds directly in front of you, allowing you to hear better in a noisy environment, such as a restaurant or on a busy street.

Question: I have some trouble hearing and have been told that I have "nerve deafness". What exactly is nerve deafness? Will a hearing aid help me?

Answer: "Nerve deafness", or sensorineural hearing loss is the most common type of hearing disorder. There are many reasons why people have sensorineural hearing loss. It can be present at birth or may occur later in life due to loud noise exposure or simply the aging process, which causes the tiny 'hair' cells in the inner ear to become damaged or to die off. When these cells deteriorate sound is no longer transmitted to the brain as well as it should be, resulting in decreased hearing sensitivity.

There are varying degrees of sensorineural hearing loss. Most hearing loss progresses very gradually so that many people don't even realize it's happening until a relative or friend points it out. They may notice that you are often asking people to repeat what they have said, that you have the television turned up very loud, or that you seem to hear, but have difficulty understanding what is being said. This type of hearing loss can be helped with hearing aids; in fact, most people who use hearing aids have sensorineural hearing loss.

Question: My husband complains of a high pitched buzzing sound in his ears. What can this be?

Answer: Your husband could have a condition called "Tinnitus" which can sound like a constant or occasional high-pitched ringing, buzzing, whistling or roaring noise. Tinnitus is a common problem but its' causes may be difficult to pinpoint.

Causes can include blows to the head; large doses of certain drugs such as aspirin; high blood pressure; noise exposure; stress; impacted ear wax, and certain types of tumors. Many people with a hearing loss experience Tinnitus.

Since tinnitus is a symptom of a problem, your husband should first have a medical examination to check for factors sometimes associated with tinnitus such as high blood pressure, drug intake, diet and allergies. An audiologist should then evaluate his hearing to determine if hearing loss is present and if so, whether he will benefit from using a hearing aid. The audiologist can also assist with the selection, fitting and purchase of the most appropriate aid and help with training to use the aid effectively.

People with mild tinnitus usually don't require any treatment. If a hearing loss is found, a hearing aid may both relieve the tinnitus and help him hear better.

The most effective treatment for tinnitus is to eliminate the underlying cause.

Unfortunately, the cause often cannot be identified, so in some cases the tinnitus itself may need to be treated. Vitamin therapy, biofeedback, or hypnosis may be helpful. Self-help groups are available in many communities for sharing information and coping strategies. Information on self-help groups is available from the American Tinnitus Association, P.O. Box 5, Portland, OR 97207.