WHO Report Predicts Hearing Loss for 1 in 4 People Worldwide by 2050

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About 1 in 4 people worldwide—nearly 2.5 billion—will be living with some hearing loss by 2050, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) in its first-ever report on the issue. Of these, more than 700 million are likely to have a moderate or higher level of hearing loss.

These projections represent a substantial uptick in the global burden of hearing loss. Currently, an estimated 430 million people worldwide live with “disabling hearing loss,” according to the WHO. “Untreated hearing loss can have a devastating impact on people’s ability to communicate, to study and to earn a living,” said WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in a statement. “It can also impact on people’s mental health and their ability to sustain relationships.”

A growing body of evidence indicates that chronic hearing loss is associated with falls, depression, and cognitive decline (and that use of hearing aids may help curb such decline), as well as loneliness and social isolation.

“Urgent public health action is needed to mitigate this projected growth,” the agency notes in the 272-page World Report on Hearing. “While people with hearing loss of all ages and across all population groups need care, special attention is needed for vulnerable populations to ensure they have access to ear and hearing care and other health services.”

Most countries do not integrate ear and hearing care into national health systems, the report says.

The majority of people with disabling hearing loss live in low- and middle-income countries where knowledge about prevention, early identification, and management of hearing loss and ear disorders often falls short, and stigmatizing attitudes about hearing loss are common.

The “most glaring gap,” however, is in health system capacity, especially with respect to the work force available to provide critical services.

Among low-income countries, for example, approximately 78% have fewer than 1 otolaryngologist per million population, 93% have fewer than 1 audiologist per million, only 17% have 1 or more speech therapist per million, and only half have 1 or more teachers for deaf students per million. “Even in countries with relatively high proportions of professionals in the field of ear and hearing care, inequitable distribution and other factors can limit access to them,” the WHO report says.

Such issues, along with others related to regulation, costs, and stigma, are driving a “notable gap” in hearing aid use, with only 17% of people who could benefit from hearing aids using them. This gap is consistently high throughout the world, ranging from 77% to 83% across WHO regions and from 74% to 90% across income levels. Even in high-income countries, nearly three-quarters of people who would be helped by hearing aids do not use them, the report says.

In the United States, for example, the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders reports that only about 16% of adults aged 20 to 69 years and 30% of adults aged 70 or older who could benefit from wearing hearing aids have ever used them.

Costs of hearing aids vary enormously across the world and even within countries, depending on the device specifications and features. In the United States, where hearing aids are not generally covered by insurance, they can range in cost from $500 to $3000, and the average price of bilateral hearing aids is $4700.

The report outlines evidence-based interventions to prevent and treat hearing loss. In children, for example, nearly 60% of hearing impairment may be prevented through such measures as...
vaccination for rubella and meningitis, improved maternal and neonatal care, and otitis media screening and timely management. At any age, noise control measures, protecting against exposure to ototoxic medications, and medical and surgical treatment of ear disorders can also help preserve hearing.

Equitable access to high-quality hearing technologies also would help reduce the burden of hearing loss, a goal that could be advanced by including them in governments' lists of essential devices, the report notes. Coverage of technologies such as hearing aids and cochlear implants, along with appropriate support services and rehabilitative therapy, is effective and cost-effective.

The WHO estimates that for every $1 invested in public health interventions to prevent hearing loss and scale up ear and hearing care, governments can expect a return of $16.

"Integrating ear and hearing care interventions within national health plans and delivering these through strengthened health systems, as part of universal health coverage, is essential to meet the needs of those at risk of or living with hearing loss," said Bente Mikkelsen, director of the WHO's Department of Noncommunicable Diseases, in a statement.

Findings from a new report on hearing loss in the United States from the National Poll on Healthy Aging, based at the University of Michigan's Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation, underscore the WHO report's message about the urgent need to address hearing loss. "Age-related hearing loss remains a neglected primary care and public health concern," the report notes.

The poll, conducted in June 2020, surveyed a national sample of adults aged 50 years or older about their hearing, use of assistive devices, and experiences with screening and testing for hearing loss. It found that 80% of those surveyed reported that their primary care physician had not asked about their hearing in the past 2 years, and nearly as many had not had their hearing checked by a professional in that time frame.

"Hearing evaluations are not often prioritized when conducting health assessments of older adults," the report says. "For example, screening for hearing loss is expected as part of the Medicare Annual Wellness Visit, yet these poll findings suggest that most adults age 65 to 80 had not recently been screened."

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None reported.