

Dr. Marquis Answers Your Questions

Q: Will listening to music all day through earbuds damage my hearing?

A: It can, depending on your particular set and on where you keep the volume. Typically, at 80% volume you can safely listen for only 90 minutes. To listen for several hours, keep the volume low. Earbuds that seal the ear from surrounding noise allow you to enjoy the music at a lower volume. If someone sitting next to you can hear your music, it's too loud.

Q: Why can I hear better on some TVs than on others?

A: Some TVs may have better speakers than others, but the room you're watching in is an important factor. High ceilings, bare hard floors, and windows all create a lot of echo that degrades the speech quality. Sitting more than about 8-9 feet from the speaker will also make understanding difficult, because the soft high frequency sounds that are needed for speech clarity will weaken with distance. If you have to sit farther away, consider putting a wireless speaker by your chair or wearing a wireless headset.

Q: Why is it sometimes difficult to tell where a sound is coming from?

A: Sound localization is a complex process requiring good hearing in both ears, but our brain also has to be able to listen intently for very subtle differences in sounds reaching the ears from different directions. Hearing loss and aging affect both of these factors. Hearing better in one ear than the other makes it difficult to localize. Also sound can bounce off of nearby surfaces and make us think it's from a different direction.

Q: Is there anything I can do to help the ringing in my ears?

A: Ringing in the ears, or tinnitus, is caused by a number of factors: hearing loss, noise exposure, stress, caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, TMJ issues, ear wax, medical conditions, and medications. A thorough exam by an audiologist and/or physician is needed to try to determine the cause and management options. These options may include medical management, hearing aids when appropriate, stress reduction, and distracting the brain using music or nature sounds. Tinnitus apps are available for iPhone and Android.

Q: What is the best type of hearing protection?

A: Plugs or muffs can be equally effective, but proper fit and comfort are important. Earplugs take time to insert properly and may not fit narrow ear canals. Earmuffs are easier to use, but they need to be tight, with no breaks in the seal caused by eyeglasses. They can be hot to wear for long periods in the summer. Preserving your hearing is well worth the effort it takes to find and use the style that's right for you.

Q: What should I do about ear wax?

A: Ear wax, or cerumen, is normal and healthy. Too little can leave the ear canal dry itchy. Too much can build up and block hearing. QTips typically push the wax deeper and can damage the ear canal, causing bleeding and infection. Your physician or audiologist can tell you the safest way to clean your ears. Hearing aid wearers need to keep their ears clean, because even a small amount of cerumen can clog the hearing aid and block the sound.

Q: Why is it so difficult to understand speech in noisy places like restaurants?

A: With background noise, our brain has to focus on the speech signal and try to ignore the noise. Aging and hearing loss make this challenging, but many of us with normal hearing also have difficulty. Most restaurants have poor acoustics, so sound bounces around and gets distorted. Loud music compounds the problem. Trying to focus on one talker can be like looking for a needle in a haystack. Sound absorbing panels are effective but costly. But turning down the music could help. If you'd like to share the name of your favorite conversation-friendly restaurant, email us at info@wakeaudiology.com.

Q: What is the best way to protect my hearing when I'm hunting?

A: Standard earplugs and earmuffs protect your ears from the gun blast, but prevent you from hearing the game as it approaches. The best option is an electronic device that amplifies the sound of the game, but compresses the gun blast. Most models look like over-the-ear hearing aids and attach to foam plugs that fit snugly in the ear canals. They can be purchased through sporting goods stores and online.

Q: I've read that untreated hearing loss can affect memory. Please explain.

A: The ears send information to the brain for processing. Hearing loss weakens or distorts the information sent from the ears, so the brain has to work harder to recognize the individual words. That leaves less cognitive energy to process the meaning of the words, making it easy to get behind in the conversation. The information is not locked in to our memory, so it's isn't available for recall at a later date.

Q: Our elderly mother wears hearing aids but she still cannot understand some of us. What can we do?

A: First be sure the hearing aids are working properly and that her ears are not blocked with wax. Speak to her slowly and distinctly. Fast speech is not clear speech. Older brains don't process quickly, so allow her time to respond. Talk directly to her, not from a distance, and turn off any competing sounds such as TV. She will appreciate your efforts to communicate with her.

Q: My elderly parents are coming for the holidays. How can we help them join in conversations so they don't feel left out?

A: Older brains have difficulty understanding in groups. Fast speech and multiple talkers make it much worse. Speak directly to them, but don't shout. Ask for their input, and allow them time to formulate their responses. Let them know when the topic is changing. Taking time for one-on-one chats can be very rewarding for everyone.

Q: My mother lives alone. She doesn't sleep in her hearing aids, and I'm concerned that her smoke alarm won't wake her up. Is there something we can get to help her?

A: Standard smoke alarms produce a high pitch sound that won't wake people with hearing loss. Some low frequency alarms are available, as well as devices that work with existing home smoke alarms. Names to look for include Loudenlow, Lifetone, and Gentex; but there are others as well.