



Pharmacy Self Care Health Facts Column

By John Bell - 12 August 2008

No.1114

How good is your hearing?

The theme for Hearing Awareness Week this year (August 24-30) is "one in six". It's a reminder that more than 3.5 million Australians have some form of hearing impairment.

It's a reminder also that the ears are much more than a couple of fairly useful appendages either side of our head. The ear is a complex piece of equipment consisting of many parts – not just the visible exterior section. And the ear is responsible not only for hearing but for maintaining balance as well.

The outer ear captures sound waves which are converted into mechanical energy by the ear drum and the tiny muscles and bones in the middle ear. The inner ear changes this mechanical energy into nerve impulses which are then transmitted to the brain. These nerve impulses are the messages we decipher as different sounds.

Semi-circular tubes or canals within the inner ear, acting like a series of spirit levels, also give us our sense of balance.

It's not surprising that with such a complicated system things might go wrong. In fact, ear problems are very common and they can be due to many causes. Some causes are very much self-inflicted.

Research undertaken a couple of years ago by the National Acoustic Laboratories found that up to a quarter of users of iPods and other portable music devices will suffer hearing problems. And it's not the quality of the music but the quantity that's causing the damage.

Industrial deafness has long been recognised as an occupational health hazard; but researchers have now shown that whether it's a power tool or loud music the adverse affects on the ear are just the same. In the study conducted outside Flinders St Railway Station in Melbourne and the Sydney Town Hall, a quarter of people listening to iPods were doing so at a volume which exceeded the safety level at construction sites.

Consistent exposure to loud music is the most common cause of hearing loss; an easily preventable cause, but as the deafness may not become apparent for some years, treatment is often initiated far too late.

"Noise destroys – turn down the volume" is also the message to come from the Australian Tinnitus Association. Tinnitus literally means ringing or tinkling in the ears, but the constantly annoying sound that many sufferers live with 24 hours a day takes many forms. It might also be a hissing or whistling sound. It might be like living with the summer sound of cicadas all year round.

Many of us, perhaps 20% of the population, experience tinnitus from time to time; but for maybe 2% it can be severe and quite disturbing.

Apart from noise there are some other aggravating or risk factors. Some medicines – notably quinine and possibly anti-inflammatory medicines – may cause tinnitus. Caffeine (in tea, coffee, cola or chocolate) and alcohol may worsen tinnitus in some people. And smoking, which narrows the blood vessels which supply vital oxygen to the ears, can make tinnitus worse. Check out the website www.tinnitus.asn.au for more information.

Tinnitus can often be managed or controlled reasonably well; even so, a cure doesn't really seem close at hand. However, treatment for some other common ear problems is often much easier, provided the cause can be identified early on. The recently up-dated *Ear Problems* Fact Card will help with some hints on how to reduce the risk of ear problems and treat those problems effectively when they do occur. The Card is available from pharmacies throughout Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information.

Inflammation, infection or a build-up of wax can affect the ears. Production of ear wax is quite normal. Excess wax can be wiped away with a cloth or a tissue wrapped over your finger; but nothing smaller than this should go anywhere near the ear canal. Hairpins, matches and cotton buds may actually cause more damage.

"Swimmer's ear" is the name given to an infection or inflammation of the outer ear canal – the tube which runs from the outside as far as the ear drum. Known medically as *otitis externa*, "swimmer's ear" doesn't only occur in swimmers, but when it does, the use of drying ear drops before and after swimming is a good prevention strategy.

Otitis media is the term used to describe an infection on the other side of the ear drum. The condition is especially common in children and antibiotics are sometimes necessary to clear the infection.

Ask at your local Self Care Pharmacy for more advice and while there, pick up a copy of the *Ear Problems* Fact Card. You can call the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 for the nearest location.