Is Australia Listening?

ATTITUDES TO HEARING LOSS
Foreword

Hearing loss is predicted to affect one in four Australians by 2050 and currently costs the economy in excess of $11.75bn per annum.1 Because of this growing problem, we recognised a need to assess Australia’s attitudes to noise and hearing loss.

Noise is becoming an increasingly popular topic, as society starts to see the impact of noisy lifestyles on physical and mental health. So, what noise do we expose ourselves to? Are we aware of the damage we may be causing to our hearing? And if so, how (if at all) do we modify our behaviour?

In addition to the general public’s interest in damage to their future hearing caused by today’s activities, the problem of hearing loss is already very real among our ageing population. Over 60 per cent of people in their 60s suffer from hearing loss and many would benefit from hearing aids. While hearing aids are becoming more widely accepted, there are still misconceptions and negative stereotypes attached to these devices, despite the benefits they provide from ever evolving technology.

As baby boomers move into their 60s, Australian Hearing is trying to educate people about hearing loss and demonstrate how today’s technology can provide excellent outcomes for people who can’t hear well. We also want young people to be aware of the damage that overexposure to loud noise can cause later in life.

This report represents our first survey into Australian’s perceptions and behaviours regarding healthy hearing.

About the survey

One thousand Australian adults were interviewed via an online survey where they were asked various questions relating to their perceptions of hearing loss, hearing aids and their exposure to potentially harmful noise levels. The study was conducted by Quantum Market Research on behalf of Australian Hearing, the country’s largest hearing service provider.

Participants were surveyed for 10 minutes online. The sample included males and females from all adult age groups, all states including both metropolitan and regional areas and all socioeconomic groups.

1 Access Economics: Listen Hear! The economic impact and cost of hearing loss in Australia, February 2006

“As baby boomers move into their 60s, Australian Hearing is trying to educate people about hearing loss and demonstrate how today’s technology can provide excellent outcomes for people who can’t hear well.”
Most Australians think that loud noise is the major cause of hearing loss.

Listening to loud music through headphones is thought to be more detrimental to hearing than other sources of leisure noise.

Despite this, more than two thirds of respondents said they listen to music through headphones regularly and 60 per cent of these people often have the volume above safe levels.

Nearly half of younger Australians (18 – 34 year olds) said they go to noisy bars and pubs and listen to music through headphones at least once a week.

One quarter of younger Australians (18 – 24 year olds) don’t realise that once your hearing is damaged, it cannot be restored.

Just over half the population actively protect their hearing by avoiding noisy places, limiting length of exposure to loud noise or limiting the volume of music played through headphones.

Forty-one per cent of people believed their hearing was ‘very good’ or ‘almost perfect’ while one quarter believed their hearing was below average.

Sixty per cent of Australians reported suffering from noticeable tinnitus, with prevalence higher among younger Australians (18 – 34 year olds).

Younger Australians (44 years old and younger) associated hearing loss and hearing aids with negative words, like “old”, “ugly” and “deaf”. Older Australians chose softer words and 73 per cent of those aged over 65 were willing to consider wearing a hearing aid.

Four in five Australians reportedly know someone with a hearing impairment.

The group identified as most likely to have a hearing loss was the elderly, however the next most likely group identified was teenagers.
Exposure to loud music

The most significant single cause of hearing loss in Australia is exposure to loud sounds. There is evidence of damage due to noise in the measured hearing thresholds of 37 per cent of Australians 15 years and older. Although most Australians appreciate that loud sounds could damage their hearing, one in five still frequently attend loud venues or listen to music through headphones.

Of those 71 per cent of Australians who do use headphones or headsets to listen to music, 96 per cent do so for less than three hours a day on average. Alarmingly, almost two in three (60 per cent) of those who listen to music through headphones sometimes have the volume so loud that people usually have to shout to be heard, indicating that it’s too loud and could be causing damage.

If you need to raise your voice or shout to be heard in background noise, then the noise is too loud.

In terms of frequency, one in five Australian adults claim that they are exposed to unbearably loud noise at least once a week. Most Australians (7 in 10) go to noisy venues like bars and listen to music through headphones, but not surprisingly, younger Australians are more likely to do so. Nearly half of 18 to 34 year old Australians go to noisy bars and pubs and/or listen to music through headphones at least once a week.

Encouragingly, nearly half of the population stated that they would only be exposed to unbearably loud noise once or twice a year at most. However, the definition of “unbearable” is subjective to each respondent.

Generally speaking, the majority of Australians appreciate that loud noise has the potential to lead to hearing damage. Nearly half of Australians (47 per cent) thought that there would be a major impact on hearing in the long term when exposed to loud noise.
Awareness of the consequences of noise

While four in five Australian adults are aware that once damaged or impaired, hearing cannot be restored to its original state, 26 per cent of young Australians (18 to 24 year olds) don’t know this. This awareness grows, with age, while 67 per cent of 18 to 24 year old Australians were aware of this, 87 per cent of 65 plus year olds knew this fact.

However, a significant proportion (15 per cent) of younger Australians (18 to 24 year olds) claim they don’t consider that loud noise may be damaging their hearing. With age comes the acknowledgement that loud noise may have a negative impact on hearing. Only one in four Australians aged below 45 thought there would be a major impact on their hearing from exposure to loud noise, compared to 40 per cent of those above the age of 45.

“When asked whether noise damages hearing in the short, medium or long term, Australians are more likely to associate loud noise with short term or long term damage. Fewer Australians felt that there was medium term damage through exposure to loud noise.”
One in four Australians believe that loud noise will have a major impact on a person’s hearing in the short term. However, 18 to 24 year old Australians were least likely to identify the link between loud noise and short term hearing damage. Younger Australians consistently ‘downplayed’ the impact of loud music on hearing, whether it be in the short, medium or long term.

Overall, the most glaring results in this research are the awareness, perceptions and behaviours of young Australians in relation to healthy hearing. The severity and permanency of the impact of loud music and venues to their hearing has not yet been accepted by this age group.

Frequency of exposure to noise
How often are you exposed to noise that becomes unbearable?

Frequency of attending noisy pubs and bars
How often do you frequent noisy places (bars or pubs, clubs, rock concerts) where you have to shout to be heard over the music being played?

Frequency of using headphones or headsets
How often do you listen to music or other recordings through headphones or headsets directly in your ears?

Time spent listening through headphones or headsets
On a typical day, for how long would you listen through headphones or headsets?

Volume of headphones/headsets
When listening through headphones or headsets, would someone need to shout in order for you to hear them?
Tinnitus can be described as a symptom resulting from a range of causes, including exposure to excessive noise. This research asked if respondents had ever experienced tinnitus, often referred to as a ringing in the ears. Almost two in three (60 per cent) Australians have suffered from noticeable tinnitus and, alarmingly, this was more prevalent in younger Australians (18 to 34 years old). Seventy per cent of 18 to 34-year-olds have experienced tinnitus compared to 50 per cent of those above 55. This may reflect a lifestyle aspect, with younger Australians more likely to attend bars, pubs and listen to music through headphones.

Tinnitus actually occurs in 100 per cent of people and is a natural phenomenon. The classic research studies on tinnitus asks young people with perfect hearing to enter a sound proof booth and write on a piece of paper what they hear. They describe what is commonly known of as tinnitus, that is a ringing or buzzing sound. These are people who said they did not have ‘tinnitus’.

In our research, one in four of those who report that they experience tinnitus, say they have a ringing in their ears at least once a week, while nearly two in five Australians said they would experience tinnitus no more than twice a year. One third of tinnitus sufferers aged 55 plus experienced ringing in their ears more than once a week. Typically, tinnitus lasts for less than an hour for most sufferers (54 per cent), but for some it can last more than 24 hours (10 per cent). Ringing ears after exposure to loud noise means that the noise level was loud enough to have caused damage. Although younger Australians were more likely to experience tinnitus, as we look at the data by age, older Australians were more likely to suffer from it more frequently. Sixty-seven per cent of those aged above 55 years report that they suffer from tinnitus more than once a week, compared to only 16 per cent of 18 to 34 year olds. And of those who have suffered from tinnitus, about half (54 per cent) claim that it lasts less than an hour, whilst one in 10 report that their tinnitus usually lasts more than a day.

Hearing loss is sometimes accompanied by tinnitus. It may come and go and can be aggravated by other loud continuous or impulsive noise. It can be triggered by loud noise and may be an indication of ear damage.

Experience of Tinnitus

**Volume of headphones/headsets**

When you are exposed to loud noise, do you consider that you may be damaging your hearing?

![Volume of headphones/headsets chart]

**Perceived impact of loud noise**

To what extent do you think exposure to loud noise affects a person’s hearing in the short, medium and long term?

![Perceived impact of loud noise chart]

**Experience of tinnitus**

Have you ever experienced ringing in the ears (called ‘tinnitus’)?

![Experience of tinnitus chart]

**Frequency of experiencing tinnitus**

How often would you experience ringing in the ears?

![Frequency of experiencing tinnitus chart]
Analysis by age shows that younger Australians are less likely to avoid noisy places for the sake of their hearing, but are more inclined to control the volume of their headphones. Australians aged between 18 and 24 were also less likely to wear hearing protection (23 per cent) than older Australians.

Despite this relatively high awareness of the potential damage of loud noise to hearing, there has yet to be a significant change in behaviour.

“Those who believe that loud noise is not damaging their hearing also felt that they had better hearing than average. This would imply either a sense of denial or lack of knowledge regarding behaviour and consequences or unawareness of one’s own hearing loss.”

Very few people believe they have ‘very poor’ hearing, with self assessments of hearing becoming more negative with age. Approximately two in five Australians (41 per cent) believe their hearing is ‘very good’ or ‘almost perfect’. One in four (25 per cent) Australians believe their hearing is below average, however each person’s concept of ‘average’ is subjective.

In reality, one in six Australians suffers from hearing loss. Over half the population aged between 60 and 70 has a hearing loss and this increases to 70 per cent of those over the age of 70.

The research revealed some trends, with those having hearing checks in the last three years more likely to believe they had poor hearing, whilst more affluent respondents (those who earned above $100K per year) were more inclined to feel their hearing was almost perfect compared with less affluent respondents.

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Getting our hearing checked

Nearly two in three (64 per cent) Australians report they have had their hearing checked, with older Australians more likely to have had a recent check.

Forty per cent of young Australians (18 to 24 year olds) say they have had their hearing checked, however this figure increases with age with at least seven in 10 Australians above the age of 55 stating they have had their hearing checked. Most Australians have had a basic ear check at primary school, although many may have forgotten.

Older Australians are also more likely to recall having had their hearing checked recently. More than one third (36 per cent) of those aged 65 and older who have had their hearing checked have done so in the past year and an additional third (31 per cent) in the past three years.

Getting our hearing checked
Have you ever had your hearing checked?

Australian aged between 18 and 24 are most likely to have had a check within the last 10 years, while those aged between 35 and 44 are most likely to have had their last hearing check more than 10 years ago.

Interestingly, men were more likely than women to have had their hearing checked. This is an encouraging sign, given that hearing loss is more prevalent in men mainly due to noise exposure in the workplace and during military service.

Also of note is that people residing in Sydney, Perth and Tasmania were significantly less likely to have had a hearing check than in other areas.

Although more than half of Australians were positive about wearing a hearing aid if their hearing deteriorated, young Australians have hesitations based on notions of hearing aids being ugly and associated with a disability.

Overall, 57 per cent of Australians stated they would wear a hearing aid if their hearing deteriorated, and 41 per cent said ‘maybe’. Willingness to wear a hearing aid increased with age.

When asked what words are associated with hearing aids, the leading association is positive: it improves hearing. There was an observable difference between the associations with hearing loss of younger Australians and older Australians.

Younger Australians (44 years old and younger) associated hearing loss with more negative and disease related words such as deafness, hearing aids, old age and impairment compared to older Australians (45 years old plus) who discussed more specific but softer aspects such as repeating questions, social isolation and being generally hard of hearing.

Notably, 12 per cent of Australians mentioned that hearing aids are discrete and unobtrusive, matching the reality of today’s highly sophisticated hearing aids.

As expected, fewer young people (44 per cent) were willing to consider wearing a hearing aid, and 10 per cent said no outright. Encouragingly, those in the middle age ranges positively associated the term, ‘hearing aids’ with comments on improving hearing and how they are small and discrete.

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Most Australians know someone with a hearing impairment, however younger Australians are less likely to have this personal contact and are likely to be more ignorant to how hearing impairment may affect their lives.

Four in five Australians reportedly know someone who suffers from hearing loss. There is a clear link between knowing someone with hearing loss and increasing age, which is not surprising given people generally associate with similar aged peers. Two in three Australians aged 18 to 24 knew someone with a hearing impairment, and this figure rises steadily with age. In the upper bracket, 93 per cent of Australians aged 65 plus knew someone with a hearing impairment.

The impact of interacting with someone with a hearing impairment was seen as minimal.

Of those Australians who reported that they suspected someone of having a hearing impairment, nearly half indicated that it causes difficulties in terms of their interaction (47 per cent). Only about one in six people indicated that the burden of hearing loss on their relationship was quite difficult.

Tips for talking to someone with a hearing loss

There is a misperception that hearing loss affects a person’s ability to hear volume. In reality, it commonly affects the ability to discriminate one sound from another. The first sign of hearing loss due to noise exposure is difficulty hearing in noisy situations, such as the dinner table or in a crowd.

Here are some tips for being understood when talking to someone who suffers from hearing loss:

• Don’t shout, speak normally.
• Face the person directly.
• Reduce background noise.
• If you are not being understood, find a different way of saying the same thing.

A similar trend was found when people were asked if they suspected someone they know of having a hearing impairment. Sixty-nine per cent of Australians said ‘yes’, however this was more prominent the older the respondent was.
The prevalence of hearing loss increases with age and this is well known among the general population, with the elderly being identified as the highest probability group.

More than half (56 per cent) of the Australians surveyed thought that 10 to 30 per cent of the population suffer from hearing impairment at some level. This is a fairly accurate assessment, with one in six (17 per cent) Australians suffering from hearing loss.

Over four in five (83 per cent) Australians feel that there are segments of the community which are at a higher risk of hearing impairment or loss than others. Older Australians (aged 55 plus) are significantly more likely to hold this opinion and are most likely to think that elderly Australians were at the highest probability.

Twenty-one percent felt that Indigenous people were a high-risk group in terms of hearing loss. This is a correct assumption although it’s unclear whether respondents were aware that this is largely due to ear infections rather than noise exposure. The level of ear disease in the Aboriginal population is much higher than that of the general population. The prevalence of middle ear problems in Indigenous Australian babies aged 12-18 months is somewhere between 50 per cent and 80 per cent.1

Younger Australians (under 45 years old) were more inclined to think that fewer people suffered from hearing impairment, probably because they do not experience it first hand. However two in five young Australians (18 to 24 year olds) felt that teenagers were likely to have a hearing impairment, though they did not think that many middle aged people have hearing loss.

On a more personal level, four in five Australians know of someone with a confirmed hearing impairment and at least two in three people suspect someone as having a hearing impairment, though they did not think that many middle aged people have hearing loss.

Who is affected by hearing loss?

Willingness to wear a hearing aid

Would you consider wearing a hearing aid if your hearing deteriorates?

Who is affected by hearing loss?

Which, if any, of the following segments do you think are more likely to have hearing loss or impairment?

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Tips for taking care of your hearing

- Listen to your MP3 player at a volume where you can hear someone who is at arm’s length without him or her having to shout.
- Limit the amount of time you are exposed to very loud noise. Take time out periodically from noisy concerts or clubs.
- Wear ear plugs or muffs if you are exposed to loud machinery or industrial noise (such as mowing the lawn).
- Learn to fit ear plugs properly.

Realistically, changing the long-term impact on young peoples’ hearing appears to involve several aspects.

Education: Bring to light the permanency and reality of prolonged exposure to loud noise including music at indoor venues, concerts and through headphones. Increasing the awareness of the short and long term effects and providing realistic options to protecting their hearing may go a long way to improving healthy hearing behaviour.

Top-of-mind: Bring the issue of hearing to top of mind for young Australians in the same way sun-smart and road driving behaviours have targeted youth attitudes and behaviours by presenting them as current and relevant issues.

Industry: Educate venue operators of the risks of high-volume noise in enclosed areas and attempt to change industry behaviours, as well as consumer behaviour for healthy hearing. Young people will always go out. Providing more realistic options with less excessive noise may provide positive change.

While the ageing population is more acutely aware of hearing loss and its impact on life, there are opportunities to better educate the older community about hearing services and solutions to hearing problems. Our advice to people aged 65 years and older is to get your hearing checked every two years. There are also long-term benefits to dealing with hearing loss early and wearing hearing aids at the outset.
Check your hearing over the telephone
You can check your hearing over the telephone in around five minutes. Based on extensive research, Telscreen has been developed by the National Acoustic Laboratories in conjunction with Australian Hearing and is the most advanced telephone hearing service in the world.

Call 1800 826 500 toll-free and follow the voice prompts.

Contact us
Call 131 797 to be connected to your nearest Australian Hearing centre.

For media enquiries call 02 9412 6800.