



Hearing loss takes toll on spouses

Hearing loss takes its toll on the affected person's spouse, an Australian study shows.

More than 100 elderly couples took part in the Queensland University study and 94 per cent of spouses reported some degree of "third party disability" because of their partner's hearing impairment.

Most reported mild problems, such as having to speak louder and repeat themselves often, but there were wider impacts on the relationship.

"The study found hearing impairment can impact on issues such as the way couples communicate, their physical intimacy and social activities, and can lead to feelings of frustration," says study author Queensland University lecturer Nerina Scarinci.

Because of their partner's hearing impairment, spouses

felt they could not communicate as before, like chat spontaneously or talk about trivial things, according to the study.

They also found themselves having to act as interpreters in group conversations, make phone calls for their partner, and avoid social gatherings because of their partner's hearing loss.

Sixty nine per cent of spouses reported they felt frustrated by their partner's hearing difficulties, and some reported feeling less satisfied with the relationship, and their intimate/physical relationship had suffered as a result.

Elder health expert Ngaire Kerse says the study is a good reminder about the "ripple effects" of hearing loss. "Hearing loss is one of the commonest disabilities and it's commonly overlooked," says Dr Kerse, who is a GP and senior lecturer

at Auckland University's department of general practice and primary health care.

If GPs have the time, she says, it's a good idea to ask patients about any potential hearing loss and the consequences of that on the family.

An audiology test is "mostly affordable", and is funded for people whose hearing loss is due to their occupation and for veterans whose hearing suffered during the war, Dr Kerse says.

For those who can't afford hearing aids, speech therapy can help teach skills and techniques to help couples communicate effectively with one another. DHBs fund speech therapy for elderly patients who cannot afford it, Dr Kerse says.

Speech therapists use a range of communication techniques, such as teaching spouses



Key findings - hearing loss

In a study of 100 elderly couples:

- 94 per cent of spouses reported some degree of "third party disability" because of their partner's hearing impairment
- most problems were mild but there were wider impacts on relationships
- 69 per cent of spouses reported they felt frustrated by their partner's hearing difficulties
- hearing loss impacted on communication, thwarting small talk and spontaneity
- some people avoided social gatherings because of their partner's hearing loss.

es to speak slower instead of louder, encouraging couples to talk face-to-face, and turning down the TV and radio.

The participants in the Queensland University were 49 to 92 years old; the mean age was 72 years for the hearing-impaired partner and 70 years

for the spouse.

The results of the study were presented by Ms Scarinci at the joint conference of the New Zealand Speech-Language Therapists Association and Speech Pathology Australia last month.

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