

HEARING LOSS IN RURAL AUSTRALIA

...good health and wellbeing in rural and remote Australia

Hearing loss can result from a range of factors, or simply be the product of ageing. Often it can be prevented, or at least its impact on one's life mitigated, through timely screening, rehabilitation and management. Access to such interventions for people in rural and remote areas needs to be improved and they might also look to other ways of addressing the problem.



Nationally, one in six is affected by hearing loss, with its prevalence projected to increase to one in four Australians by 2050, driven largely by the ageing population. In children, hearing loss impairs speech and language development, which in turn undermines the ability to learn. In adults, it negatively impacts on employment opportunities and social functioning, among other things.

Hearing loss in rural Australia

Approximately 15 per cent of people living outside Major cities have hearing disorders compared with 12 per cent of those living within them.

Prevalence rates for hearing loss are largely related to age. Less than 1 per cent of people under the age of 15 are affected by hearing loss, whereas three in every four people over the age of 70 are affected. The ageing of Australia's population is more marked in rural areas with 40 per cent of all Australians 70–74 years of age living outside Australia's capital cities compared with only 25 per cent of people aged 25–29.

The most significant cause of hearing loss is exposure to excessive noise, accounting for around 37 per cent of all cases. In rural areas there is greater exposure to occupational noise, particularly in farming and mining. Over half of Australia's farmers are likely to suffer from premature hearing loss through occupational noise exposure (e.g. from agricultural machinery). Almost all farmers over the age of 55 who have been exposed to loud noise suffer some degree of hearing loss, but only 18 per cent of farmers wear hearing protection while working with heavy machinery. The Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety has released a Farm Noise Injury Prevention Strategy: www.farmsafe.org.au

Rural and remote Australia is also home to around one third of Australia's war veterans. War veterans are more likely to

suffer from hearing problems due to damage from noise exposure during their service. Hearing loss is the second most common medical condition reported by Australian war veterans and war widows, with 55 per cent reporting hearing loss as a current medical condition.

Major causes not related to age or exposure to noise include damage to the ear as a result of illness or accident, and exposure to toxins, including the side effects of some medications.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, around 70 per cent of whom live outside the capital cities, experience some of the highest levels of ear disease and associated hearing loss in the world, with rates up to ten times more than those for non-Indigenous Australians. Over 50 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the Northern Territory have some form of hearing loss, with about 10 per cent having moderate to severe loss. The main cause is a high prevalence of otitis media (middle ear infection) due to environmental conditions associated with poverty: overcrowded housing, poor nutrition, poor sanitation and passive smoking.

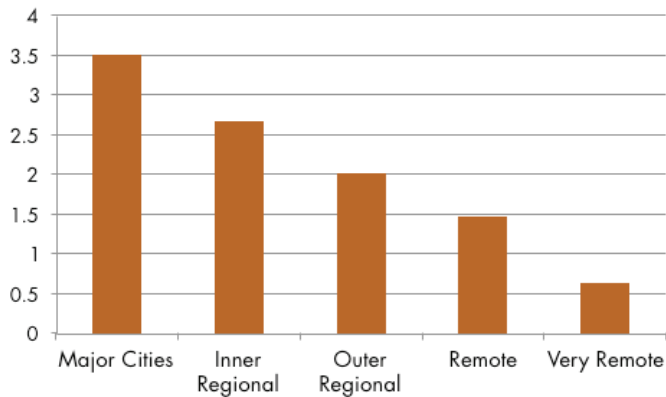
Rural Health West manages Outreach in the Outback: Healthy Ears - Better Hearing, Better Listening, which aims to increase access to a range of services, including expanded care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth (0–21 years) for the diagnosis, treatment and management of ear and hearing health. See www.ruralhealthwest.com.au

GPs and hearing health professionals

GPs play a pivotal role in the early identification of, and appropriate referral for, hearing loss, yet many rural communities have insufficient access to GPs. Hearing health specialists too are often in insufficient numbers to meet demand in rural and remote communities. As is the case

with GPs, the number of speech pathologists and audiologists decreases with remoteness, and this is also certain to be the case for otolaryngologists (ear, nose and throat specialists).

Number of Speech Pathologists and Audiologists per 10,000 Population, 2011



There are now simple tools available for the identification of hearing loss and associated disability. It will always be useful to ensure that clinicians in rural and remote areas, as elsewhere, are well aware of the adverse impacts of hearing loss on mental and physical wellbeing, and of the benefits of aural rehabilitation.

Telehealth offers an alternative to face-to-face visits with GPs and hearing health professionals. Often screening and speech rehabilitation can be performed via telephone or through use of the Internet, which can be quick, effective and relatively inexpensive. Not only does telehealth have a broader reach because of its accessibility to individuals in rural and remote areas, it also appeals to individuals who, for whatever reason, were not intending to see a health professional in person.

The Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine Telehealth Provider Directory, available at www.ehealth.acrrm.org.au provides contact details for GPs, ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialists, speech pathologists and others who offer hearing health services.

An example of a hearing telehealth program is VidKids which provides services to children with hearing loss living in rural and remote areas. The project utilises video conferencing to stream therapy, counselling, diagnostic services, technological assistance and education support into the homes of children living in rural and remote areas. See www.vidkids.org

Australian Hearing and the Hearing Services Program

Australian Hearing provides hearing services to clients eligible under the Australian Government Hearing Services Program. The Program provides eligible people with free-of-charge access to a range of hearing services such as hearing assessments, rehabilitation programs and the fitting of hearing devices. Visit www.health.gov.au/hear for further details, including a local hearing service locator tool. For more information, including how to obtain a service, call Australian Hearing on 131 797.

The National Relay Service

The National Relay Service (NRS) is an Australia-wide service which supports people who are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment to use the telephone or other communication technologies. It most commonly involves a relay officer converting text communication to voice, and voice communication to text, to enable text and voice users to communicate freely. The NRS is an Australian Government initiative funded by a special levy paid by eligible telecommunications carriers. It is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at no additional charge to regular calls.

Although comprising the majority of those with hearing impairment, older people may not perceive themselves as having a disability and therefore may not be linked into networks that are familiar with the NRS. As people who have the most to gain from using the NRS, older people are a key target group for awareness-raising, and health practitioners in rural Australia can play a key role in referring this target group to the NRS, as well as anyone else with hearing and/or speech impairment who is not aware of NRS services.



Health and aged care professionals can learn more about the NRS and possibly gain Continuing Professional Development (CPD) points by completing the NRS e-learning module Understanding the NRS. It provides information and training for all health professionals working with clients who have hearing or speech impairment so that they can confidently support clients in using the NRS. The module includes stories of actual NRS users and video animations showing how the different relay call options work. It is particularly useful for rural health practitioners who may not be able to attend in-person training in urban centres and, as the module is online, it can be accessed from anywhere and completed according to your schedule. The module can be accessed at www.relayservice.com.au/e-learningmodule



More information about the NRS can be found at www.relayservice.gov.au or through the NRS Helpdesk on 1800 555 660.