

Descendants of the “Greatest Generation”

Baby Boomers – The Next Generation to Have Hearing Difficulties

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For many of you between the ages of 46 to 64, your time is coming.

Time, that is, to experience what so many of your parents and grandparents came to learn of fist hand: hearing difficulties caused by exposure to excess loud noise.

The “Baby Boomer” generation – those Americans born between 1946 and 1960 – accounts for some 76 million of us in the United States today and at least 15 percent of Boomers already have hearing loss.

This is a far cry from the previous 2 generations, who typically did not show symptoms of hearing loss until they were in their 70’s and 80’s. Indeed, when I was an audiology student at Minot State University earning my Master’s of Science degree I was taught that only men in their 70’s and 80’s got hearing loss.

What has changed? Our world is now much, much louder.

An Unprecedented Century

Prior to the Industrial Revolution of the 1890’s, relatively few Americans were exposed to loud noise. At the turn of the 20th Century, much of our population inhabited rural areas with males working in non-mechanized agriculture and females involved in homemaking chores, which they performed by hand. There were no vacuum cleaners or food processors.

However, with unprecedented technology, mechanization, and involvement in two World Wars, the US population got its first dose of exposure to excessive levels of loud noise.

Still, the field of audiology – born of the technological research in sonar for the Navy in WWII -- was in its infancy in the 1950’s and was relying on the only set of data on hearing loss available till then, which was testing conducted at the 1939 World’s Fair in San Francisco.

But a funny thing happened. That data was proven wrong when, in the mid 1980's women in their 60's started showing up in audiologist's offices across the country with *identical* hearing loss of their male counterparts.

Who were these women and why, for the first time in recorded history, were they suddenly experiencing hearing loss? She was, in fact, the "Rosie the Riveters" of WWII: those young American women who, with all the men serving in the armed forces, went to work in the factories and shipyards providing the "Arsenal of Democracy" with much needed war effort labor. These women built the Liberty ships, Sherman tanks, and B-17 bombers used to defeat the Axis Powers And got themselves a hefty dose of hearing loss in the process!

Post War Boom

After victory in WWII Americans got busy in the greatest economic surge in human history ... and had babies. *Lots* of babies.

And as those babies grew into young adults in the 60's and 70's a flourishing American economy provided them with all sorts of loud recreational activities. From rock concerts to ski boats to hot rods to stereo systems, Americans got a steady diet of loud noise long before subsequent research showed the direct correlation between the noise and hearing loss.

Early Hearing Aids: Low-Tech = Bad Reputation

Parents of the Boomers had lousy timing as hearing aids back then were pretty awful. These devices only made sounds louder for the wearer. While a few people benefited from this simplistic approach to solving hearing difficulties, most did not and hearing aids got a deserved bad reputation.

So bad in fact that after graduating from school, I steered my career towards diagnostics, performing testing of the hearing system for the determination of medical problems such as the location and size of brain tumors and balance problems.

The Digital Breakthrough

Everything about hearing aids changed in the late 1990's with the breakthrough of digital hearing technology. In essence, digital hearing aids are miniature computers that dramatically increase the amount of sound processes possible (and available to the wearer) as opposed to the old linear and analog products. And digital products keep getting better, with several major advancements taking place during the last decade with

the last two years seeing some terrific gains.

Today's digital products are so advanced we don't even call them hearing "aids" anymore. Instead we prefer to call these amazing products "hearing technology" as they are smaller than ever with superb sound quality. Top-of-the-line models have features that Boomers need such as "directionality" for enhancing sound coming to from the front, while tuning down sound coming from behind such as someone might experience at a noisy restaurant or party. Also, Bluetooth capability enhances the lives of 21st century on-the-go active Americans.

Educate Yourself: Get the Facts about Hearing Care

The myths and misperceptions associated with hearing loss and hearing aids of 30 years ago should be put to rest. The science of Audiology has come a long way as has hearing technology. No one needs to suffer all the serious communication issues associated with hearing difficulties ... if they would only seek help. And I urge you to do so because hearing is a wonderful gift!

About the writer: Crystal Chalmers, Au.D., is an AudigyCertified™ Doctor of Audiology, the owner of North State Audiological Services in Chico, and a member of AudigyGroup, the nation's largest member-owned association of independent hearing care professionals.

Since 2006, AudigyGroup has interviewed over 5,000 of the 18,000 audiologists in the United States, yet has selected only 250 to be members in this elite association. AudigyCertified™ is a trade-mark of AudigyGroup, LLC.

To learn more about Dr. Chalmers, her practice, and AudigyGroup visit online at www.nsaudiology.com or call (888) 844-7024

SIDENOTE: More baby boomers showing signs of hearing loss

- More than 50 million Americans have some degree of hearing loss—approximately one in 6 individuals -- and this number is expected to increase further by 2030. Much of that looming surge is a baby-boomer phenomenon.
- Among Americans ages 46 to 64, about 15 percent already have hearing problems, according to a survey by the Better Hearing Institute.
- Two out of three people with hearing loss are below retirement age.
- Sixty percent of people with hearing loss are male.
- Only 12 percent of physicians today ask patients if they have any hearing problems.
- Only one in five people who could benefit from hearing devices currently wear them.