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Executive Summary

Hearing health is clearly an important concern for midlife and older adults.

- Roughly seven in ten respondents said it is an extremely or very important concern for other adults ages 45 and older and slightly fewer considered it as an extremely or important concern for themselves and their friends and family members.

- Additionally, more than eight in ten respondents reported that maintaining their hearing health is extremely or very important to them in maintaining their quality of life, while about half said hearing gets insufficient attention.

- Similarly, more than eight in ten respondents reported that they would be more likely to seek treatment for a hearing issue if they thought it would improve their quality of life or if doing so would allow them to maintain their independence.

Yet, a majority of respondents appear to consider hearing issues as less important than other health issues.

- Notably, they report that they are less likely to have gotten a hearing test in the past five years than to have had the other four health exams about which they were asked: a physical exam, a dental exam, a vision test, or a dermatology scan.

Further, a majority of respondents show a cavalier attitude toward hearing issues, both their own and those of friends and family members.

- Two-thirds said they consider their hearing “fine” in some situations (and not in need of treatment), six in ten were “faking it,” saying that it is easy to find ways to cover up some hearing difficulty, and more than half asserted that unless their hearing difficulties are severe, they will not seek treatment.
Executive Summary

Moreover, respondents exhibit reticence in addressing the hearing issues of those close friends or family members.

- While six in ten respondents said they consider the hearing of someone they know to have declined, fewer than four in ten reported having broached the subject with them. This is in spite of only seven percent of respondents saying they would find it extremely or very difficult to have such a conversation.

Unfortunately, our results suggest that midlife and older adults are unaware (or in denial) about the connections between hearing health and other health issues.

- Two-thirds of respondents reported that their hearing is the same as it was five years ago, yet, about half reported having untreated hearing issues, including the roughly one-third of respondents who believe their hearing is not as good as it should be, but do not believe it needs to be treated.

- Correspondingly, current research from Johns Hopkins University on hearing loss suggests that letting hearing issues go untreated can lead in the long term to other health problems — such as memory problems, increased risk of falls, heightened risk of hospitalizations, and even earlier onset of dementia.

- Equipping friends and family members of those with hearing issues with trusted and credible information on the connection between hearing health and overall health (and the importance of early detection and treatment) and giving them tips on ways to begin a conversation on the topic are critical to addressing this important health issue.
Hearing Health/Hearing Loss Especially Important to Older Adults

When it comes to their opinions about hearing loss, nearly all respondents reported that they consider the hearing health and hearing loss of people ages 50 and older to be an extremely / very or somewhat important concern, with somewhat fewer expressing the same levels of concern for the hearing health of their close family members and friends, themselves personally, and the U.S. population in general.

Q2. This poll will ask you a number of questions about hearing health and hearing loss… In your opinion, how important of a concern is hearing health to…?

Base: Total Respondents [n=1,799].
Maintaining Hearing Health is Critically Important to QOL

A similarly large majority of respondents consider maintaining their hearing health as extremely or very important to the quality of their life.

Importance of Maintaining Hearing Health to Quality of Life

- Extremely: 29%
- Very: 52%
- Somewhat: 17%
- Not very: 1%
- Not at all: 1%

Q4. As you get older, how important is maintaining your hearing health to your quality of life? Base: Total Respondents [n=1,799]
Maintaining Quality of Life, Independence, and Alertness Key to Seeking Treatment

The affordability of treatment, the urging of friends and family to seek treatment (and related the sense that hearing issues were having an adverse affect on their relationships), and enabling one to stay in the workforce longer are somewhat less motivating.

Q14. The statements below describe things that might or might not cause you to seek treatment for a hearing issue. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- Strongly disagree/disagree
- Neutral
- Strongly agree/agree

- It would improve my quality of life
- It allows me to maintain my independence
- It would result in my being more mentally and physically alert
- I was sure I could afford it
- Someone I cared about urged me to seek treatment
- I felt it would help me stay in the workforce longer (among those working)
- I felt it was limiting my relationship with my family and friends
- I felt that treating difficult hearing would cause me to be less of a burden on my family
- I knew someone else that has been treated successfully for a hearing difficulty
- It would make me less likely to develop other health issues
- My grandchildren asked me to seek treatment (among those with grandchildren)
- I was afraid that I would embarrass myself by mishearing someone

**Base:** Total Respondents [n=1,799]; Those Currently Working [n=886]; Those with Grandchildren [n=792]
HEARING ISSUES IMPORTANT, YET NOT ACTED UPON
Adults Consider *Insufficient Attention* Paid to Hearing

Along with the concern they show for hearing health and the potential for hearing loss, more than half of respondents said that the importance of getting a regular hearing check-up gets *insufficient attention* compared to other health issues.

Q3. In your opinion, does the importance of getting a regular hearing check-up get insufficient attention compared to other health issues, about the right amount of attention, or too much attention compared to other health issues?

Base: Total Respondents [n=1,799]
Nearly Half Acknowledge Deterioration, Yet Have Not Taken Action

With two-thirds of respondents saying their hearing is the same as it was five years ago, it seems that many midlife and older adults are postponing treatment, perhaps reflecting their lack of awareness — or denial — of the connection between hearing health and overall health. When asked about their ownership of hearing aids or devices, one in twelve said they currently own a hearing aid or hearing device, and one in fifty currently use other hearing assistive technologies other than hearing aids.

Q15. Which best describes your own hearing health?
Base: Total Respondents  [n=1,799]

Q16. How would you describe your hearing health compared to five years ago? My hearing is…?
Base: Total Respondents  [n=1,799]
Hearing Tests Trail Visits to a Dermatologist

Even though majorities of midlife and older adults said they consider hearing health to be important, believe that getting a regular hearing exam gets insufficient attention, and see the connection between hearing health and quality of life, they appear to be prioritizing other health exams over getting a hearing test.

Health Exams Within the Past Five Years

- Annual physical exam: 86%
- Visit to the dentist: 81%
- Vision test: 81%
- Visit to the dermatologist: 32%
- Hearing test: 24%
- None of these: 4%

Q1. Which of the following have you had in the past five years?
Base: Total Respondents [n=1,799]
Discussions With Medical Professionals Uncommon

Given the stated importance respondents place on hearing health, it seems surprising that roughly seven in ten respondents reported not having discussed hearing issues with any medical professional who deals with hearing. However, this finding is consistent with their prioritizing hearing exams below other types of medical exams.

Q17. Have you discussed hearing issues with…?
Base: Total Respondents [n=1,799]

- Your primary care physician: 16%
- An audiologist: 14%
- A physician that specializes in hearing issues: 12%
- A hearing instrument specialist: 6%
- None of these: 68%
REASONS FOR DELAYING OR FORGOING ACTION
Majorities Show Cavalier Attitude Toward Hearing Issues

In light of the apparent lack of awareness of the importance of addressing hearing issues in a timely fashion, it is perhaps not surprising that more than half of respondents strongly or somewhat disagreed with six of the nine statements about which they were asked, suggesting that they are not unduly concerned about hearing difficulties.

Q11. The statements below describe how you may or may not feel about having a hearing issue. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Base: Total Respondents [n=1,799]
Recognition of Some Hearing Loss, Yet Not “Enough” for Action

One-third of respondents reported having difficulty hearing when there is background noise and one-quarter reported having to strain to understand conversations. One-fifth said they hear a ringing, roaring, or hissing sound a lot; a similar proportion said it is hard for them to follow a conversation when two or more people talk at the same time. Notably, more than four in ten respondents said none of the eleven situations apply to them.

Q18. Which of these statements, if any, apply to you?
Base: Total Respondents [n=1,799]

- I have difficulty hearing when there is noise in the background: 34%
- I sometimes have to strain to understand a conversation: 23%
- I hear a ringing, roaring, or hissing sound a lot: 19%
- It is hard for me to follow a conversation when two or more people talk at once: 17%
- I sometimes misunderstand what others are saying and respond inappropriately: 16%
- Many people I talk to seem to mumble (or not speak clearly): 15%
- People complain that I turn the TV volume up too high: 15%
- A family member often has to repeat what others have said to me: 13%
- I have difficulty understanding higher pitched voices like women and children: 9%
- Other people suggest that I might have difficulty hearing: 9%
- I avoid interacting with other because I can't always hear them as well: 4%
- None of these apply to me: 44%
Hearing Loss Results in Limited Impact on Day-to-Day Activities

More than half of respondents with hearing loss strongly or somewhat disagreed with eight of the eleven statements about which they were asked, suggesting that their daily interactions are not unduly affected by their hearing difficulties. Unfortunately, this belief may be part of the reason that they seem to delay seeking care until the issue becomes dire.

Q21. Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about hearing loss.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree/disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Strongly agree/agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I find it hard to follow conversations when in noisy situations</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing difficulties can negatively impact my relationships with my family and friends</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not being able to hear well affects my safety</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tend to bluff or pretend I hear and understand conversations</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family gatherings are a strain because so many people are talking at once</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is uncomfortable to talk with others about not being able to hear as well as I would like to</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tend to withdraw from social situations because I can't hear as well as I would like to</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel cut off from my family and friends because I can't hear them as well as I would like to</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revealing my hearing difficulty could cause me problems in my job</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't do activities because hearing difficulty doesn't let me participate as I would like</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People don't include me in conversations because of my hearing difficulty</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: Respondents Who Have Hearing Loss  [n=1,039]
Workers Unconcerned About Hearing’s Effect on Job

Nearly six in ten respondents who are currently working said they would not be concerned that hearing difficulties would affect their ability to remain employed. Similarly, nearly half of those who are currently working said they would not be concerned about reduced effectiveness at work due to a hearing issue.

Q12. Still imagining you suspected that you might have difficulty hearing...would you be concerned that hearing difficulties would hurt your ability to remain employed?
Q13. And would you be concerned that hearing difficulties are reducing / would reduce your effectiveness at work?
Base: Those Currently Working [n=886]

Concerned That Hearing Difficulties Would Affect Ability to Remain Employed

- Yes: 38%
- No: 58%
- Refused: 4%

Concerned That Hearing Difficulties Would Reduce Effectiveness at Work

- Yes: 49%
- No: 46%
- Refused: 4%
Majority Said Discussing Hearing Issues Not Difficult

Among respondents who reported knowing someone with hearing loss, nearly three-quarters said it is *not very or not at all difficult* to discuss hearing issues with this individual.

Q25. How difficult do you find it to discuss hearing issues with your family member or friend who has difficulty hearing?

Base: Respondents Who Know Someone With Hearing Loss [n=1,071]
Knowing Someone With Hearing Issue Common; Recommending Help Less So

Six in ten respondents know a friend or family member whose hearing has declined, but slightly more report never having suggested that they get professional help and treatment for a hearing issue. Among suggesters, four in ten (or more) recommended their friend or family member go to a physician who specializes in hearing issues, to an audiologist, or to their primary care physician.

Q22. Do you know a family member or friend whose hearing has declined?
Base: Total Respondents [n=1,799]

Q23. Have you ever suggested to someone that he/she get professional help and treatment for a hearing issue?
Base: Total Respondents [n=1,799]

Q24. What have you suggested a person with a hearing issue do?
Base: Respondents Who Suggested Treatment [n=663]
GETTING HELP FOR HEARING ISSUES
Adults Likely to Get Check Up If Needed and Know Where To Go

More than three-quarters of respondents said they would be extremely or very likely to have a hearing check-up if they thought they had an issue with their hearing health. However, somewhat fewer — about two-thirds — said they would be extremely or very confident that they would know where to get help if they had a hearing issue. Notably, those who are not very or not at all confident in knowing where to go are younger (ages 45-49), rate their hearing health as less than excellent, and—not surprisingly—have not had a hearing test in the past five years.

Q5. If you felt you had an issue with your hearing health, how likely would you be to get a hearing check-up?
Q6. If you felt you had an issue with your hearing health, how confident are you that you would know where to go to get help?
Base: Total Respondents [n=1,799]
Doctors and Medical Websites Top Sources for Information

When looking at the most likely sources of information for hearing issues, it is notable that self-help sources (such as medical or health websites or internet search engines) rank about the same as medical specialists.

**Human Sources of Information**
- Primary care doctor: 70%
- Physician that specializes in hearing issues: 47%
- Audiologist: 29%
- Family member: 16%
- Friend: 8%
- Someone at a retail store or pharmacy: 1%
- Someone else: 1%
- Nobody—I’d be unlikely to seek help: 1%

**Other Sources of Information**
- Medical/health websites: 48%
- Internet search engines: 40%
- Hearing-related websites: 32%
- Events such as health fairs or seminars: 8%
- Health newsletters: 6%
- Books: 3%
- Magazines: 2%
- None of these: 27%

Q7. To whom would you be likely to talk if you felt you had an issue with your hearing health? Q8. If you felt you had an issue with your hearing, where would you look for information?

Base: Total Respondents [n=1,799]
Specialized Expertise Main Criterion When Seeking Help

Finding a professional with a high level of training on hearing issues would be critically important, cited by roughly two-thirds of respondents. Slightly fewer noted the quality of the hearing exam or the provider’s knowledge of hearing options as critically important to them if they were seeking help for a hearing issue, with an easily-accessible location and follow-up provider-based services rounding out the list of top five.

Q9. Which of the following would be critically important to you if you were to seek help for a hearing issue?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finding a professional with a high level of training on hearing issues</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The quality of the hearing exam</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider knowledge of hearing issues</td>
<td>55%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finding a location that is easy for you to get to</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The follow-up services provided by the provider</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider offering of hearing aids and devices</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How concerned and caring the provider seems to be</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding a way to pay for care</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these would be critically important</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base: Total Respondents [n=1,799]
Lack of Coverage, Complacency, and Cost Are Barriers to Help

Lack of sufficient health insurance coverage, opting to “live with” minor hearing issues, and the cost of treatment were the top three reasons that respondents noted as preventing them from getting help for a hearing issue. Notably, four in ten said that none of the items about which they were asked would prevent them from getting help.

Q10. Which of the following might prevent you from getting help for a hearing issue?

- My health insurance doesn’t sufficiently cover the cost of treatment: 27%
- Minor hearing issues are easy enough to live with untreated: 24%
- Treating hearing issues would cost too much: 22%
- I am so busy dealing with other health issues that I don’t focus on hearing: 9%
- I am not sure which type of health provider to go to: 7%
- I am not sure where to go for information: 6%
- I don’t have health insurance: 6%
- I don’t have transportation: 3%
- I don’t think I have the physical ability I would need to successfully use hearing aids: 2%
- I don’t think I can keep track of what I need to do to use hearing aids successfully: 2%
- None of these: 41%

Base: Total Respondents [n=1,799]
METHODOLOGY
Background

In November 2018, AARP Research contracted with IPSOS Public Affairs, LLC to field a survey among adults ages 45 and older to gather information about U.S. adults’ hearing health. In the survey, respondents were asked about their own hearing as well as that of their family and friends. They were also asked about the importance of hearing health and hearing loss, credible sources of information about hearing issues, their likelihood of seeking diagnosis and treatment for hearing difficulties, and possible reasons for delaying or forgoing treatment altogether.

The major impetus for this project was the recognition that hearing issues, left untreated, can lead to many other health problems later in life. We were interested to learn whether or not midlife and older adults know of the connection between hearing health and overall health and the extent to which they begin to (or fail to) take steps to address hearing issues when they arise.

In many respects, this survey was designed to replicate that done in 2011 by AARP, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), and Crux Research, Inc. However, it differs in two important ways: the 2011 study was done by telephone among AARP members ages 50 and older; this study was conducted online among IPSOS panelists ages 45 and older. Due to these differences, comparisons between these two studies are beyond the scope of this report.
Objectives and Methodology

Objective: To gather information about U.S. adults’ hearing health.

Methodology: Online, nationally representative survey via IPSOS’s KnowledgePanel®, with sample targeting panelists age 45 or older.

Sample: IPSOS KnowledgePanel®, N=1,799
Oversample: Additional interviews were conducted to achieve the following samples:

- 216 Hispanic/Latinos age 45-plus (conducted in both English and Spanish)
- 193 African Americans age 45-plus

Fielding Dates: October 16-29, 2018

Weighting: Data are weighted according to the March 2018 Current Population Survey (CPS) by gender, age, region, metropolitan status, race/ethnicity, household income, education, language proficiency, and Hispanic origin.

Questionnaire Length: Interviews averaged 11 minutes in length. The full questionnaire is available upon request.

Confidence Interval: Total sample: ± 2.5 percentage points. The margin of error among subgroups (e.g., age cohorts, race/ethnicity oversamples) is higher.

Note: Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.
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About AARP

AARP is the nation’s largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering Americans 50 and older to choose how they live as they age. With nearly 38 million members and offices in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, AARP works to strengthen communities and advocate for what matters most to families with a focus on health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. AARP also works for individuals in the marketplace by sparking new solutions and allowing carefully chosen, high-quality products and services to carry the AARP name. As a trusted source for news and information, AARP produces the nation’s largest circulation publications, AARP The Magazine and AARP Bulletin. To learn more, visit www.aarp.org or follow @AARP and @AARPadvocates on social media.

Acknowledgements

IPSOS Public Affairs, LLC, conducted this survey for AARP using its nationally representative online panel, KnowledgePanel®. The author would like to thank Joyce Arnone, Mark Shroeder, and Katherine Zorn for their input into questionnaire design. She would also like to thank the IPSOS team of Dave Parcell, Emily Sprague, and Abby Cohen for their assistance in fielding the survey. This report was prepared by Teresa A. Keenan, Ph.D., in AARP Research. For more information about the survey, contact Teresa Keenan at tkeenan@aarp.org.