

Diabetes and Hearing Loss

In 2015 there were 2.28 million cases of diabetes in South Africa. Diabetes has been known to cause many side effects which can often be devastating and sometime even life threatening. One of the known complications is hearing loss, specifically high frequency sensorineural hearing loss.

How can a metabolic disease like diabetes affect the ears? Diabetes causes the body to create abnormal amounts of keratin, which upsets the pH balance and natural bacterial activity of the ear canal. This causes abnormal sensitivity to foreign materials, leading to increased irritation and infection. It can also cause recruitment, which is a distortion of loud sounds. Many diabetics have poor speech understanding, especially in noisy environments, and occasionally hearing loss can even be fluctuating. Diabetes can also cause tinnitus and balance problems.

So why is it important for an Audiologist to know if our patient is diabetic? When considering hearing aids for a patient there are many variables to determine, including the material used to build the hearing aid, and the size. Often an ENT consultation is required to assess the sensitivity of the ear canal, so that the right material and fit can be selected. The Audiologist would also need to consider fairly high end technology in the hearing aid, to be able to compress the loud sounds to prevent distortion in the ear. Where the hearing is fluctuating, the person may find a volume control or program button, or a remote control or Smartphone App helpful. The person may require more regular than normal adjustments of the hearing aid.

It is extremely important to be aware of one's diabetes status, as well as to share this information with your audiologist. Knowing about the condition and it's challenges will allow the audiologist to make an informed decision of a hearing aid that would meet the person's needs, and to counsel the patient on realistic goals and expectations.

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