UNDERSTANDING ENT HEALTH FOR OLDER ADULTS



Florida Gulf Coast ENT and ALLERGY LLC

THE NATURAL AGING PROCESS CAN BRING ABOUT CHANGES IN THE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION OF THE EARS, NOSE, AND THROAT.

Common ENT issues in older adults include **age-related hearing loss, tinnitus, sleep apnea, dizziness and balance disorders, chronic rhinitis and sinusitis, vocal changes, and swallowing issues.** These conditions can have a significant impact on communication abilities, overall health, and quality of life. Timely evaluation, diagnosis, and appropriate treatment are crucial to ensure optimal hearing, maintain proper vocal function, alleviate symptoms, and prevent complications.

Age-Related Hearing Loss

Age-related hearing loss is perhaps the most common ENT issue facing seniors. Each decade of our lives, we lose 5% of our hearing nerves. By age 65, we only have 67% of hearing nerves remaining. Nearly everyone has some degree of hearing loss by age 40, and this loss steadily increases as we grow older. Because the loss is gradual, older adults may not realize they have lost some ability to hear. Age-related hearing loss usually affects both ears equally and it is frequently accompanied by tinnitus, which is the perception of some type of sound in the ears when none is truly present.

Health conditions such as diabetes or high blood pressure can contribute to hearing loss. Ear infections, a heart condition, stroke, brain injury, or a tumor may also affect your hearing. Noise exposure and genetic predispositions are also common causes of hearing loss that presents later in life. Hearing loss can also result from taking medications that can damage the inner ear. If you notice a problem while taking a medication, talk to your doctor.



Studies show that hearing loss leads to an increased risk for cognitive decline, dementia, social isolation, anxiety, depression, and falling – creating a diminished quality of life and increasing the chance for injuries. Additionally, people with mild hearing loss are nearly three times as likely to fall, with each 10 decibels of hearing loss increasing the risk of falling.

Depending on the cause and severity of hearing loss, treatment can include hearing aids, cochlear implants, assistive listening devices, removal of ear wax or foreign objects, antibiotics, or surgery. Some studies suggest that treating hearing loss can help preserve hearing long-term.

Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA)

Sleep apnea is a condition in which you repeatedly and temporarily stop breathing during sleep. The most common type of sleep apnea is obstructive sleep apnea (OSA). Obstructive sleep apnea occurs when muscles in the upper airway relax, narrowing the airway and blocking the flow of air to the lungs. People with OSA often suffer from snoring, morning headaches, and excessive daytime sleepiness. A major sign of OSA is being awoken by gasping for air or a feeling of choking. The risk of OSA increases with age, although it seems to plateau around the age of 65. Because sleep apnea can lead to high blood pressure, heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, stroke, depression, and more, it is critical that you receive proper diagnosis and treatment.

Vocal Changes

Over time, our vocal cords naturally lose elasticity and strength, leading to voice changes, including hoarseness and change in pitch. Typically, women will notice a decreased pitch, while men will notice an increased pitch. Data shows that almost 50% of adults over the age of 65 notice a difference in the sound of their voice. Most cases are not serious; in serious cases, treatments can include speech therapy, vocal cord injections or implants, and addressing acid reflux and post-nasal drip.



Balance Disorders, Dizziness and Vertigo

A balance disorder affects your body's ability to hold an upright, safe position and is often experienced as dizziness and vertigo. Dizziness is a feeling of being unsteady or having a distorted sense of your body in the space around it. Vertigo involves a sense a movement, as if you or the environment around you is spinning.

Dizziness and vertigo can be accompanied by lightheadedness, blurred vision, confusion, disorientation, nausea, and vomiting. Dizziness and vertigo are symptoms of numerous conditions, including anxiety, dehydration, circulation issues, nervous system and brain conditions, medication side effects, and inner ear disorders.

Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo (BPPV) is a common inner ear disorder that causes sudden, brief episodes of spinning dizziness triggered by head movements. It is usually caused by the displacement of small calcium crystals within the inner ear's balance organs. These crystals can migrate into the semicircular canals, leading to the sensation of vertigo when the head is moved. These crystals can become dislodged for several reasons, such as serious trauma to the head or even minor trauma such as a violent sneeze or bumping your head into something. BPPV can occur at any age but is most common in people over the age of 50.

Other ENT disorders that cause dizziness and vertigo include:

- Autoimmune Inner Ear Disease
- Acoustic Neuroma
- Mal de Debarquement Syndrome
- Ménière's Disease
- Labyrinthitis
- Otosclerosis
- Ototoxicity
- Perilymph Fistula
- Vestibular Migraine
- Vestibular Neuritis

FALLS ARE THE LEADING CAUSE OF FATAL AND NONFATAL INJURIES FOR OLDER AMERICANS.

More than 1 out of 4 Americans over the age of 65 falls each year.

TO REDUCE THE RISK OF FALLING, TAKE THESE SAFETY PRECAUTIONS:

- Minimize driving
- Minimize going up and down the stairs
- Walk with a cane or walker
- Install “grab bars” in the bathroom
- Wear low-heeled shoes

Chronic Rhinitis & Sinusitis

As we age, the nasal and sinus tissues may become more sensitive and prone to inflammation, making them more susceptible to chronic conditions. Additionally, age-related changes in the immune system can weaken the body's defenses against infections, increasing the risk of sinusitis.

Symptoms of chronic rhinitis and sinusitis include persistent nasal congestion, postnasal drip, facial pain or pressure, reduced sense of smell, coughing, and fatigue. These symptoms can significantly impact daily activities, sleep quality, and overall well-being. In some cases, chronic sinusitis can lead to complications such as recurrent sinus infections or the development of nasal polyps.

Treatment often involves a multidisciplinary approach, including medications to reduce inflammation, relieve symptoms, and treat underlying infections. Nasal irrigation with saline solution or corticosteroid sprays can help clear the nasal passages and alleviate congestion. In cases where nasal polyps are present, surgery may be necessary to remove them.

Additionally, identifying and avoiding allergens or irritants, maintaining proper humidity levels at home, and practicing good nasal hygiene can help prevent exacerbations and improve symptoms.



Swallowing Issues

Swallowing issues, also known as dysphagia, are prevalent among older adults due to age-related changes such as weakened muscles in the throat, reduced sensation, decreased saliva production, dental problems, or neurological conditions like stroke, Parkinson's disease, or Alzheimer's disease.

Older adults may experience symptoms such as coughing or choking during meals, throat discomfort, regurgitation, or a feeling of food getting stuck in the throat. Dysphagia can lead malnutrition, dehydration, weight loss, and aspiration pneumonia.

Your ENT physician can evaluate the underlying causes and develop appropriate treatment plans. Treatment may involve modifications to the diet and fluid consistency, such as thickened liquids or pureed foods, to make swallowing safer and more manageable. Certain swallowing exercises and techniques can be employed to improve muscle strength and coordination. Medication management, dental care, and nutritional support are integral components of a comprehensive approach. In some cases, assistive devices or feeding tubes may be needed to ensure adequate nutrition and hydration.

Taste and Smell Disorders

Older adults may experiences changes in their ability to smell and taste. As we age, our taste buds and scent receptors can diminish or become less sensitive, leading to a reduced ability to taste and smell. Additionally, some medical conditions that tend to affect older people — such as Alzheimer's disease or Parkinson's disease — can cause taste and smell disturbances. The treatment for taste and smell disorders depends on the underlying cause. In some cases, addressing the specific medical condition or adjusting medications may help improve taste and smell perception. For age-related changes, there might be limited treatment options, but making dietary adjustments and using more intense flavors or aromatic spices can enhance the eating experience.

VISIT FLORIDA GULF COAST ENT FOR YOUR AGE-RELATED ENT HEALTH.

At Florida Gulf Coast ENT, we are highly trained and experienced in evaluating, diagnosing, and treating age-related ENT health concerns. We provide personalized care and comprehensive treatment plans to address the unique needs of older adults. Using the latest advancements and state-of-the-art care, we can help even the most complex cases with precision. The Florida Gulf Coast ENT team helps older adults regain their independence, communication abilities, overall well-being, and promote a better quality of life.

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We proudly offer exceptional compassionate service that includes a full spectrum of adult and pediatric diagnostic, therapeutic and surgical services for problems involving hearing, sinus and throat.

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