



Chime

The National Charity for
Deafness and Hearing Loss

National Hearing Loss Survey

Ireland's first national report on attitudes
and behaviours towards hearing loss

Foreword

In November 2021, McKeever & Associates, a leading research company, undertook a detailed study of the attitudes and behaviours towards hearing loss, of Irish adults aged 50+. Stratified sample quotas were put in place to reflect the demographic patterns by age cohorts 50–59 yrs, 60–69 yrs, and 70–80 yrs. Statistically robust samples were achieved across each age category.

A total of 578 surveys were completed with the survey being completed online. Of the total sample 51% of the completion were female and 49% male. This report outlines the key findings of the research. It also refers to other research that provides further insights to help inform future actions to reduce the level of unaddressed hearing loss in Ireland.

McKeever 
and Associates

Introduction

Ireland has a high level of unaddressed hearing loss – we prescribe hearing loss at less than half the rate of the UK per head of population¹. According to the HSE, 8% of the adult population have a significant hearing loss and need audiological intervention² – that's 300,000 people in Ireland. However, only one in five people with significant hearing loss in Ireland have hearing aids³.

Chime has been campaigning for several years to improve the level of take up of hearing aids amongst the population. Cost was one barrier identified and following a change to the hearing aid grant available through the Department of Social Protection, an additional 7,000 people got hearing aids in 2021⁴.

Also, in 2021 the World Health Organisation (WHO) published a report on ear and hearing care⁵. It highlighted the high level of unaddressed hearing loss around the world and urged Governments to put in place national hearing care plans for their populations. It said this would represent excellent value for money: globally for every \$1 invested in hearing care, governments could expect a return on investment of almost \$16 over the following 10 years.

While there has been some increase recently in the number of people getting hearing aids, more needs to be done to reduce the level of unaddressed hearing loss and we need to better understand what is contributing to the low uptake of hearing aids in Ireland. In late 2021 Chime commissioned McKeever and Associates to undertake research on the attitudes and behaviours of Irish adults aged 50+, with stratified sample quotas completed to reflect the demographic patterns by age cohorts 50–59 yrs, 60–69 yrs, and 70–80 yrs, towards hearing loss. Statistically robust samples were achieved across each age category. This report outlines the key findings of the research. It also refers to other research that provides further insights to help inform future actions to reduce the level of unaddressed hearing loss in Ireland.



What did the survey find?

1. HEARING LOSS IS HIGHLY PREVALENT

We know that hearing loss becomes more prevalent in adulthood and later life. The survey results confirmed this, with 43% of respondents stating that they had noticed some deterioration in their hearing during the previous five years. A very significant 37% of respondents in their 50s noticed some deterioration, indicating that hearing loss is not something that is confined to older age.

43% of people aged 50–80 years experienced some deterioration in their hearing: that's equivalent to 602,000 adults in Ireland

Only 7% of the survey participants were using any assistive technology such as hearing aids or cochlear implants to manage their hearing loss. Again, this finding supported the evidence that there is a high level of unaddressed hearing loss in the Irish population. But why is this the case?

2. HEARING LOSS CREEPS UP ON YOU

One theme that emerges consistently from the research is the insidious nature of hearing loss. We know that for most people, acquiring a hearing loss is a gradual thing that occurs over a period of years. What the survey revealed is that people start making compromises which gradually build over time, often unconsciously. The survey findings indicate that people cope with the initial onset of hearing loss through making minor adjustments in their behaviour, such as turning up the volume on the TV or radio. Over time, as their hearing deteriorates further, they make more significant adjustments and the impact on their wellness and quality of life becomes more pronounced. Examples of common behaviours and feelings are shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1.

| SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF PEOPLE COPING WITH DETERIORATING HEARING LOSS | |
|--|---|
| Early Stages | Late Stages |
| Turning up the volume on the TV and radio Feeling exhausted after social events | Feeling embarrassed and less confident in social situations |
| Listening harder, e.g., turning one's ear towards person talking | Starting to avoid certain social situations |
| Asking people to repeat things, saying 'what' a lot! | Awareness that one is missing out on parts of conversations regularly |
| Feeling that people are mumbling. | Feeling exhausted after social events |
| Difficulty hearing people clearly especially in crowded places | Feeling frustrated when talking to family members |
| Withdrawing from conversations | Feeling isolated and anxious |
| It feels a little harder to hear people on the phone | You don't remember things people tell you as well as you used to |



The fact that deteriorating hearing is typically a gradual process that occurs over a period of years is likely to be a major factor contributing to people delaying a number of years before taking action. The stealthy nature of hearing loss is something we need to be aware of. The deterioration in hearing may be less obvious to individuals than deterioration in sight. 86% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that people are much quicker to get their eyesight checked than their hearing, and 89% agreed or strongly agreed that people wait until their hearing has become quite bad before they seriously consider getting a hearing aid.

3. HEARING LOSS AFFECTS HEALTH!

The survey found that for those who had noticed a deterioration in their hearing, including those who had noticed just a slight deterioration, many experienced a range of difficulties in their everyday lives. Table 1 provides details of some of these experiences, such as reduced confidence and increased anxiety.

Furthermore, 73% of survey participants agreed or strongly agreed that hearing difficulties have a significant impact on a person's social life, while 67% agreed or strongly agreed that people with hearing difficulties may start to remove themselves from social situations.

TABLE 1.

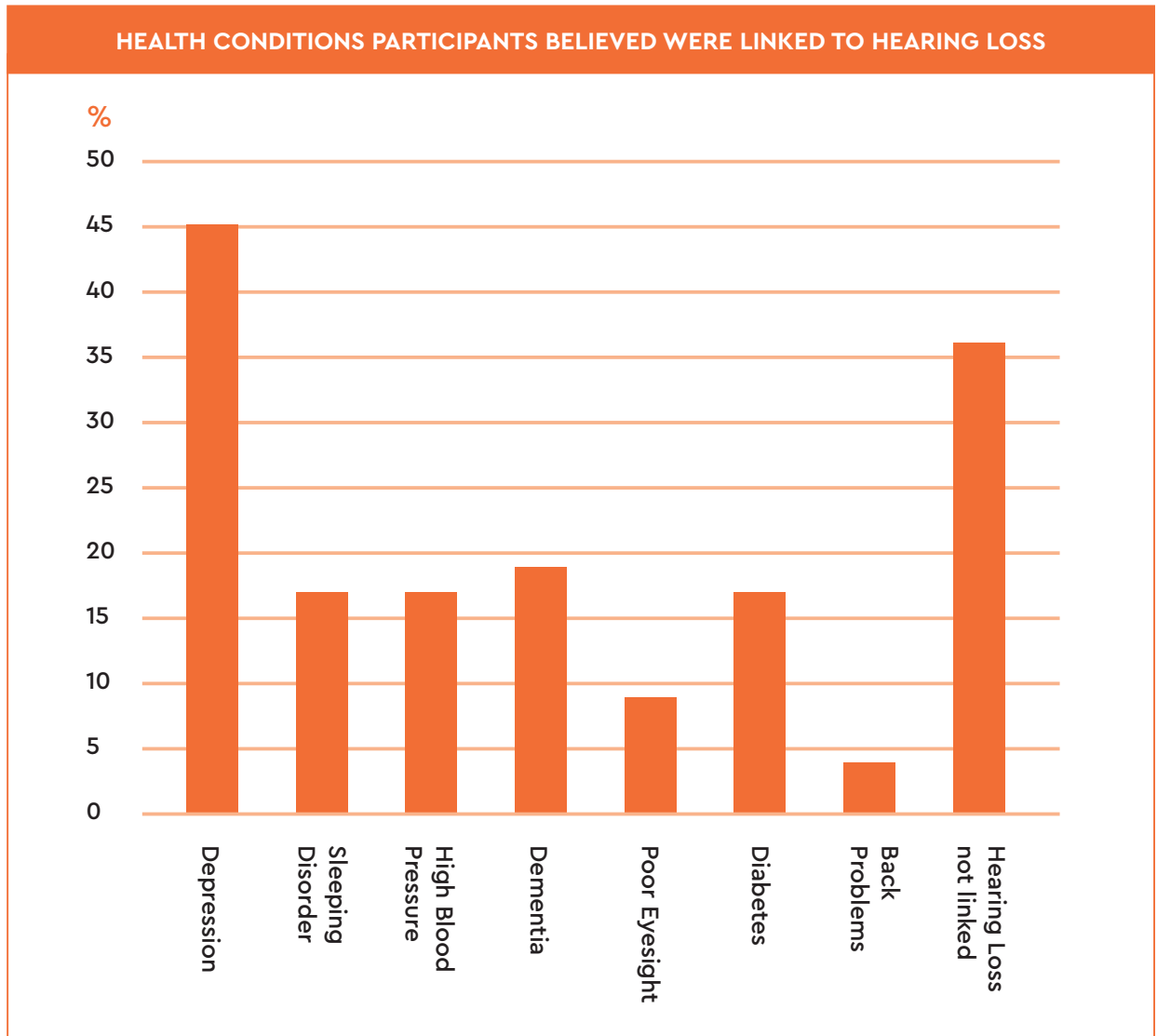
| WHAT PARTICIPANTS WITH DETERIORATING HEARING SAID | |
|--|------------------------|
| Survey Statement | Agree / Strongly Agree |
| My hearing difficulty has had an impact on my confidence in social situations. | 23% |
| My hearing difficulty causes me to feel frustrated when talking to members of my family. | 29% |
| My hearing loss causes me to feel embarrassed when I meet new people. | 19% |

The numbers of people affected are very significant: based on our survey findings, almost 140,000 people have reduced confidence and 175,000 experience frustration when communicating with family members due to hearing loss. These large figures represent a major source of emotional distress and anxiety in the population and underline the importance of reducing this through enabling and encouraging people to take action on their hearing loss.

The survey asked participants if they believed hearing loss was associated with other health conditions (see Table 2). Around a third believed hearing loss was not associated with other health conditions – the reality is that research has demonstrated clearly that there are significant health risks associated with hearing loss. Thankfully these risks can be largely eliminated by addressing hearing loss early.



TABLE 2.



Almost half of participants indicated that depression could be linked to hearing loss. There is ample research to show that there is increased anxiety and mood disorders associated with hearing loss, with the risk of depression typically reported as being doubled amongst those with acquired hearing loss.

Less than one in five were aware of the association between hearing loss and cognitive decline. One study found that the rate of cognitive decline in older age with hearing loss compared to hearing peers was double for people with mild hearing loss, three times for those with moderate hearing loss, and five times for those with severe hearing loss⁶. In 2020 a Lancet Commission of global experts in dementia estimated that 8% of dementia cases could be prevented by early treatment of hearing loss⁷.

Thankfully there is strong evidence that this increased risk is largely eliminated through the early fitting of hearing aids⁸.

79% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that people wait until their hearing difficulty becomes quite bad before considering getting a hearing aid.



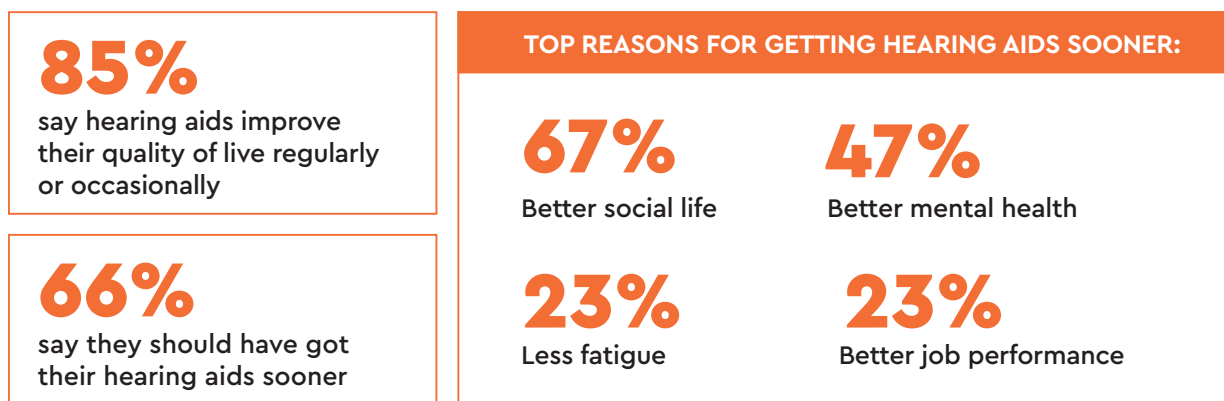
Other research has shown that hearing loss is associated with increased risk of falls and hospitalisation, reduced independence and increased social isolation. Despite the impact and risks associated with unaddressed hearing loss, many people choose to put taking action on the long finger – which results in increased emotional distress and reduced quality of life for many.

4. HEARING LOSS IS ADDRESSABLE!

Although hearing difficulties can impact significantly on people's lives, thankfully for most the solution is relatively straightforward. The first step, which may be the most challenging, is to become consciously aware of the indicators of hearing loss, both early and advanced. Awareness is the first critical step. The second step is to decide to managing your hearing in much the same way as you would manage another aspect of your health, such as your eyesight. This would mean that you get a hearing test with a qualified audiologist. The reduced hearing might be due to ear wax, which is easily removed. For a small number of people, particularly those whose hearing difficulties are due to middle ear problems, the hearing loss may be rectified through ear surgery. But for the vast majority of people who develop hearing loss in adulthood, the straightforward solution is the fitting of hearing aids. Accepting the need for hearing aids, where they are needed, is vital and there are a wide range of effective and discreet hearing devices available on the market.

Modern digital hearing aids are highly sophisticated minicomputers that are extremely effective in reducing the impact of hearing loss and restoring quality of life. Surveys of hearing aid users across Europe report high levels of satisfaction, improved social relationships and better quality of life⁹ (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2.



Next Steps

The survey provides important insights into the underlying reasons why Irish people delay addressing hearing difficulties. A lack of understanding and awareness of the typically gradual onset of hearing loss are significant factors in the delay for people taking action. The resulting impact on quality of life and health arising from unaddressed hearing loss on such a large portion of the Irish population is very significant from a population health point of view.

The survey participants were strongly in favour of a greater focus on hearing loss. 77% agreed or strongly agreed that the issue of hearing loss is largely ignored and needs more attention.

Chime is committed to highlighting these findings to help inform the wider public and relevant health professionals to encourage people to act earlier if they are experiencing hearing difficulties. Chime is also committed to lobbying the government to act on the recommendations of the WHO and develop a population wide hearing health strategy that encourages people with hearing difficulties to take action and provides them with timely access to the audiology services they need.

REFERENCES

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- 6 Lin F.R. et al, Hearing Loss and Incident Dementia (2011).
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- 8 Amieva H. et al, Self-Reported Hearing Loss, Hearing Aids, and Cognitive Decline in Elderly Adults: A 25-Year Study (2015)
- 9 Eurotrak Survey of Hearing Aid Users. EHIMA (2019).



chime

The National Charity for
Deafness and Hearing Loss

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ADDRESS:

CHIME
35 North Frederick Street,
Dublin 1
D01 W592

PHONE:

1800 256 257

TEXT:

087 922 1046

EMAIL:

info@chime.ie

WEBSITE:

Chime.ie