WHAT WE KNOW
Epidemiological evidence indicates that rates of hearing loss increase dramatically after age 35 and reach extremely high rates in older age groups. As many as 3 in 4 Americans ages 75 and older have some degree of hearing loss in both ears. We know that even mild degrees of hearing loss affect a person’s quality of life and happiness, and more advanced hearing loss contributes to loneliness, depression and even dementia.

Hearing loss can be prevented, and most hearing loss can be treated through timely detection and management. However, for many people, hearing screening, treatment and overall hearing health is not a priority health concern. Helping people form habits to protect their hearing and maintain hearing health helps slow hearing loss. Motivating the public to pay attention to their hearing health requires delivering the right health communications messages in a form that is persuasive.

MESSAGE RESEARCH
Message research, conducted in October 2023, explored four messages to increase the public’s interest in learning about and screening for hearing loss, as well as encouraging use of hearing protection. These four messages (included at the end of this document) represented different ways to engage audiences:

- Normalizing hearing loss by naming the number of people impacted and comparing it to vision health.
- Normalizing hearing loss by naming the number of people impacted and emphasizing effective technologies and tools to treat and prevent hearing loss.
- Increasing alarm by naming the connections between hearing loss and significant health harms like dementia and depression and emphasizing that solutions are available.
- Connecting hearing health to our desire to stay connected with family and friends.

These results are intended to guide how you start a communication to engage an audience; they are not meant to discourage the use of other messages and facts once you’ve interested an audience.

Recent research supported by the CDC on hearing loss in the United States shows a need for urgency to engage the public to take action on hearing loss and understand its short and long-term impact on their lives. Go to www.soundcheckmap.org to learn more.

This guide condenses lessons from a messaging experiment to inform an outreach strategy to engage members of the public about hearing loss. We provide our findings to help support your communications efforts about hearing health.

January 2024

ENCOURAGING PEOPLE TO PROTECT THEIR HEARING:
Lessons from Message Research

This guide condenses lessons from a messaging experiment to inform an outreach strategy to engage members of the public about hearing loss. We provide our findings to help support your communications efforts about hearing health.

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OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

The most effective message tested in this research was the one that drew a parallel to vision:

40 million adults in the U.S. experience hearing loss, but it can be managed. Your hearing is as important to your health as clear vision. Getting glasses is not a big deal, and neither is getting hearing aids. Ask your doctor about screening for hearing loss and how to protect your hearing.”

This message does three things for audiences:

1. Normalizes hearing loss by naming how common it is and that it is manageable.
2. Compares hearing loss to vision, a common and relatable health concept.
3. Encourages people to talk to their doctor about screening and protecting hearing.

ADDITIONAL MESSAGING INSIGHTS

Age, income and education are not good predictors of how interested in or concerned someone is about hearing loss. People of all ages were interested in hearing health, screening and protection even before seeing messages encouraging the use of protection and talking to a doctor about screenings.

The recommended message drawing a parallel to vision is most effective in increasing interest in taking action for audiences ages 45 years or older. Audiences under 45 years old had the strongest response to the recommended message as well as the message that connected hearing loss with isolation, depression and dementia, and stating there are effective treatments.

People with the greatest risk of hearing loss because of jobs that often expose them to noise were most moved by the recommended message.

Stating how common hearing loss is and encouraging people to talk to their doctors about screening and prevention is the most effective way to increase interest in using hearing protection.

There are notable differences in how some populations reacted to the messages tested in this research:

• None of these messages were broadly effective at increasing interest or action among Asian & Pacific Islander audiences or people in the Western region of the U.S. The only messages that started to create some movement were the two that normalized hearing loss.

• Latino audiences were not moved by the recommended message above. However:
  - They were moved to learn more and take some actions by messaging that focused on the importance of hearing to staying connected with friends and family.
  - Their level of concern about hearing loss was increased by a message that normalized hearing loss and emphasized that there are effective treatments and prevention.
The messages tested in this experiment were:

**Normalizing Hearing Loss and Screenings (Glasses Comparison):** “40 million adults in the U.S. experience hearing loss, but it can be managed. Your hearing is as important to your health as clear vision. Getting glasses is not a big deal, and neither is getting hearing aids. Ask your doctor about screening for hearing loss and how to protect your hearing.” (This option is designed to test an approach that normalizes hearing loss by number and comparing it to routine care.)

**Normalizing + Focus on Effective Treatments:** “40 million adults in the U.S. experience hearing loss, but it can be managed. Like most conditions, hearing loss can be diagnosed and often treated with new technologies and prevented with choices to protect your hearing today. Ask your doctor about screening for hearing loss and how to protect your hearing.” (This option is designed to test an efficacy message alone. Essentially, is a lack of understanding of solutions a barrier?)

**Aspiration: Connecting with Friends and Family:** “Spending time with friends and family is one of the great joys in life. Protecting your hearing can help you stay connected with the people who are most important to you. Ask your doctor about screening for hearing loss and how to protect your hearing.” (This option is designed to test a purely positive message rooted in shared aspirations and values.)

**Hearing Loss is Connected to Other Health Challenges:** “Hearing loss is connected to depression, loneliness and even dementia. Your doctor can help you prevent hearing loss if you act early. Ask your doctor about screening for hearing loss and how to protect your hearing.” (This option is designed to spark fear or deep concern before clearly stating that there are steps to prevent hearing loss.)

The research on the hearing loss map was conducted by NORC and the message research was conducted by Burness.