

## Doctors may miss diagnosis of hearing loss, study finds

By **Lindsey Tanner**  
*The Associated Press*

CHICAGO — Hearing loss in the elderly is easily treated but often underdiagnosed by doctors who in some cases wrongly consider it an inevitable part of aging, a study found.

The most common cause of deafness in older adults is nerve damage, which is not reversible but can be substantially improved with hearing aids and sometimes surgery for severe cases, said Dr. Bevan Yueh, an ear specialist with the Seattle Veterans Affairs center and the University of Washington.

But reversible hearing loss also occurs in older adults, caused by common conditions including infections that can be treated.

Many patients and primary-care doctors are ill-informed about both types of hearing loss and consider it an untreatable effect of aging, Yueh said.

In a report in today's Journal of the American Medical Association, Yueh and colleagues reviewed previous studies on methods to detect hearing loss and the effectiveness of treatments. They said research indicates that hearing loss affects up to 40 percent of adults age 65 and older. It is strongly tied to depression and decreased quality of life, but the researchers said fewer than 10 percent of internists offer routine testing to older patients.

Some types of hearing loss, including gradual nerve-related impairment, might not be obvious in a doctor's quiet examination room, and patients might not bring it up.

"Because it's so gradual, people say, 'It's OK, I'll get used to it.' In the meantime, they're getting depressed ... and becoming socially isolated," Yueh said.

Dr. Munsey Wheby, president of the American College of Physicians, which represents 115,000 internists and medical students, agreed that hearing loss is underdetected in older adults, partly because of lack of awareness among some primary-care doctors.

Wheby said mild hearing loss might be missed in routine exams because "there are subtle changes that people are able to compensate for or fake it a little."

Only 25 percent of patients with treatable nerve-related hearing loss receive hearing aids, the study found.