

Say What?



Question: Lately, I find myself having to ask others to repeat what they say. I just can't make out any conversation at all, especially in a noisy environment, even if the speaker is directly in front of me. I took up a complimentary hearing test offered by a hearing-aid company but it seems there is nothing wrong with my hearing. What can I do to hear better? I'm in my 40s.

Answer: Our ability to hear depends on our ears to pick up sound vibrations. Our inner ear then converts the sound energy into electrical signals that are then transmitted to the brain via our hearing nerve. Finally, our brain needs to interpret the sound for us to understand what we hear. Hearing, therefore, involves understanding what we hear (mainly speech) rather than just picking up sounds. Most people have no difficulties comprehending speech in a quiet environment. However, our ability to comprehend speech when there is background noise is far more varied.

A basic hearing test simply tells us that we are able to hear sound of certain loudness and gives little information about our comprehension ability. Hence, more advanced hearing tests are needed. However, these are rarely carried out due to lack of time and sometimes lack of appreciation of their importance when making the diagnosis of hearing impairment. Solutions to not being able to hear may include hearing aids and education about good communication strategies. There are also hearing rehabilitation programmes that can help enhance our ability to comprehend when there is background noise.

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