



WHAT did you say?

A LOCAL STUDY IS aiming to uncover more information on hearing impairment — its prevalence and attitudes towards treatment — in Singapore.

Spearheaded by Dr Ho Eu Chin, an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) consultant at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), the study is funded by the National Healthcare Group's Clinician Scientist Career Scheme.

Hearing impairment is defined as a loss of hearing. It can be further classified by its severity — mild, moderate, severe or total. These can be a result of ageing, occupational hazards or lifestyles. A degenerative condition, hearing impairment worsens as time goes by.

Lack Of Information

“Most of the data we have on hearing impairment is from Western countries. This is not very effective as there are many differences between the

A NEW STUDY EXPLORES THE ISSUES SURROUNDING HEARING IMPAIRMENT IN SINGAPORE.

BY ASHUTOSH RAVIKRISHNAN



Singaporean population and others — from ethnicities to societal norms and attitudes. We need to better understand the situation in Singapore, not other countries,” Dr Ho tells *Lifewise*.

Dr Ho's team comprises a full-time research assistant, Ms Agnes Chew, and the hospital's audiologists. Together, they laid the groundwork for the study in late 2013 and began collecting data in March last year.

Since then, the team has screened nearly 1,400 patients, all of whom are patients of TTSH's ENT Department. Patients who

visit the department for any condition, even those unrelated to hearing, are also invited to participate. Their demographics — age, socioeconomic group, ethnicity, sex, and so on — are noted before they undergo a hearing test conducted by an audiologist.

While accurately reflecting the differences in age, socioeconomic group and sex of the population, the study is, however, limited by its underrepresentation of certain ethnic groups. “We have to take this into consideration when extrapolating the information to the larger community,” says Dr Ho.

Late To Seek Help

The study confirmed suspicions that patients who visited the clinic for hearing impairments were often already in the later stages of the disorder. This suggests that they had been living with the problem for some time — several decades in some cases — before seeking help.

Dr Ho attributes this phenomenon to the gradual nature of most hearing impairments. People who face a sudden or drastic loss in hearing — which can be a result of injuries — will almost always seek treatment immediately.

However, people whose hearing worsens over a longer period — some up to 30 years — may be unaware of this gradual loss.

This notion was supported by research conducted on patients who were visiting the department for conditions unrelated to hearing — in this group, 30 to 40 per cent had unknowingly experienced at least mild hearing loss. Their hearing impairment only came to light after the test, proving just how unnoticeable the condition can be.

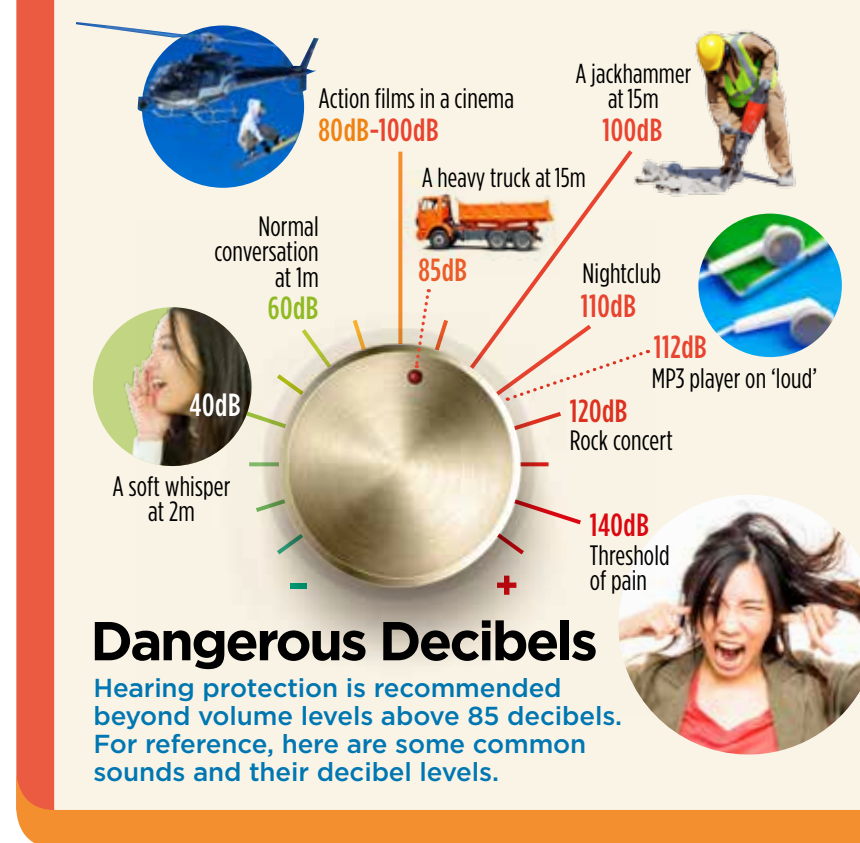
It is Dr Ho's belief that every year, such patients lose one to two per cent of their hearing. The



WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION IN SINGAPORE, NOT OTHER COUNTRIES.

DR HO EU CHIN; CONSULTANT; EAR, NOSE AND THROAT DEPARTMENT; TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL

PHOTO: CORBIS; ISTOCKPHOTO; SHUTTERSTOCK



Dangerous Decibels

Hearing protection is recommended beyond volume levels above 85 decibels. For reference, here are some common sounds and their decibel levels.

SOURCE: NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE (UNITED KINGDOM), OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH ADMINISTRATION (UNITED STATES)

first sounds to fade are usually background noises that people ordinarily ignore — such as the hum of an air conditioner.

At the mild to moderate stages, patients often ask people to repeat themselves — the problem then becomes noticeable to everyone but the patient who often goes into denial. Most patients therefore seek help only at the severe stage, at which point they themselves noticed the problem.

Changing Attitudes

Attitudes towards hearing loss are to blame for this phenomenon — many people assume that hearing impairment can be left alone until it becomes unbearable, at which point the problem can be easily corrected with a hearing aid.

This is not untrue, but most people fail to realise that the brain needs time to adapt to a hearing aid — at an early stage, the brain can adapt in as quickly as a day or two. If hearing loss is longstanding, adaptation can

take weeks or months. As such, it is advisable to wear a hearing aid earlier, rather than later.

Fortunately, the study suggests that such attitudes are also changing. Younger people are coming forward to get screened for hearing impairment and are willing to use a hearing aid if necessary.

“Twenty years ago, the youngest patient with a hearing aid would be in his early 40s. Now, we have users in their mid-20s. This is probably a result of greater awareness,” explains Dr Ho.

Rising affluence has also led to more patients wearing two hearing aids, instead of the usual single ear piece. Dr Ho believes that this is ideal as hearing impairment almost always happens in both ears, but adds, “one is better than none”.

The team aims to wrap up the study after collecting data from 3,000 participants, which it is confident of doing by the end of the year. The final results of the study will be published in both local and international medical journals. **LW**