Doctors Don’t Ask Older Patients About Their Hearing

Only 20% of older adults received hearing screenings in the last two years.

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A recent national poll reveals that 80% of American adults ages 50 and older say their doctor has not asked about their hearing in the past two years. What’s more, nearly the same proportion of adults say they haven’t had their hearing checked by a professional within that time frame, reports the University of Michigan (UM).

The National Poll on Healthy Aging (NPHA) included answers from a sample of more than 2,000 adults ages 50 to 80 across the country.

Findings also showed that men were more likely than women to have received a recent audio screening or exam. This was also the case with people ages 65 to 80 compared with those not yet on Medicare. Even so, 72% of men and adults over 65 were not screened.

Overall, 16% of older adults declared that their hearing ability was fair or poor. That proportion rose to 28% among those who said their physical health was fair or poor and to 31% among those who ranked their mental health as fair or poor.

These adults were also less likely to have had their hearing tested within the past two years despite being more likely to experience hearing issues.

“Age-related hearing loss can have wide-ranging consequences and can be addressed with assistive technologies, yet these data show a major gap in detection and disparities between groups,” said Michael McKee, MD, MPH, a family medicine physician and health services researcher at Michigan Medicine, UM’s academic medical center. (McKee wears a cochlear implant and helped the poll team develop questions and evaluate poll results.)

Despite many studies that show about 50% of elderly people have some degree of hearing loss, only 6% of older adults reported currently using a hearing aid device. Researchers believe that the cost of testing and devices prevent older adults from accessing these services and technology.

Although a majority of older adults hadn’t been screened or tested for hearing loss in recent years, 62% expressed that taking an audio exam every two years is somewhat or very important.

Preeti Malani, MD, director of NPHA and a physician at Michigan Medicine, said the poll results are timely because the Food and Drug Administration “expected regulations regarding over-the-counter hearing aids, which could improve access but also make screening and testing more important for those who might seek to buy their own device without a prescription.”

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