

# Free hearing screening (online) for all

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Hearing loss is an under-diagnosed medical condition that significantly impacts the physical and mental health of those who have any degree of hearing difficulty. Disabling hearing loss is being called the 'invisible epidemic.' It affects more than three million South Africans and over 1.5 billion people globally. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that in just two more decades, this number will exceed 2.5 billion. To help create more awareness, Bonitas Medical Fund is offering free online hearing screening for all South Africans.



One of the biggest concerns associated with hearing loss when it is not treated properly is the long-term impact it has on the quality of life. Prevention and early detection are important, after all, hearing is the foundation for speech and language development, as well as learning and communication.

This is why Bonitas Medical Fund has introduced an online hearing screener on its website [www.bonitas.co.za](http://www.bonitas.co.za). "We have partnered with hearConnect to make this functionality available to all South Africans," says Lee Callakoppen, principal officer of Bonitas.

The online, validated speech-in-noise hearing test uses the latest in audiological technology. This is combined with the highest standards of clinical expertise and available on the website. In just two minutes you can test your hearing status.

All you need is access to a computer or your mobile, headphones or ear plugs, a quiet area, and then you're all set to take the test. If the screening test indicates you are experiencing hearing loss, hearConnect is available to guide you through

the next steps. "Our partnership with hearConnect includes a full audiology benefit management programme for our members. This includes a follow up with ongoing treatment steps if hearing loss is detected."

The introduction of this programme has also improved audiology benefits for Bonitas members – offering full cover for all consultations, tests and treatment needs without any unwanted co-payments. This is subject to the use of an audiologist on the hearConnect Audiology Network, hearConnect treatment protocols and clinical pathways.

There are many challenges associated with hearing loss. These include language development that impacts our ability to read, write, spell and concentrate. It affects social skills resulting in isolation, depression, loneliness, cognitive impairment, unemployment and an increased risk of dementia.

Hearing loss also has a direct impact on healthcare costs. "As a medical scheme, we know that patients with untreated hearing loss experience more inpatient stays compared to those without hearing loss," says Callakoppen. "This has a direct impact on healthcare utilisation costs. There is a 17% increased risk of emergency department visits, readmissions and rate of hospitalisation as well as longer hospital stays."

### **What causes hearing loss?**

Hearing loss can come about as you age or as a result of loud noises, illnesses and disease, genetics and trauma (contact sport) can also cause hearing loss. Other factors, such as too much earwax, also reduce your ability to hear.

### **Don't blast your eardrums**

Overexposure to loud music, or any loud noises, can be harmful. Research indicates that hearing loss results from a combination of sounds being too loud, listening to loud sounds over an extended period and the frequency of exposure.

A BMJ Global Health review recently reported that pumping tunes, listened to via earbuds or even live, could be placing up to 1.35 billion young people at risk of hearing loss worldwide.

### **The gift of hearing**

"Our new ABM programme, with hearConnect, supports our initiative with Gift of the Givers and sponsorship to test over 15,000 learners this year. The learners are from Grade R to Grade 12 at schools in six areas within KZN," explains Callakoppen.

"This project uses a South African manufactured portable audiometer, called the Kuduwave. It's a state-of-the-art, medically certified device that has revolutionised the testing and diagnosis of auditory related deficiencies. It combines a headset, audiometer and sound booth into a single, lightweight device, which can be used in just about any location.

"The combination of the online testing through hearConnect and the Kuduwave means we are able to offer a comprehensive hearing testing solution in South Africa," says Callakoppen.

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