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**May is National Better Hearing Month**

As more become isolated in COVID-19 crisis, audiologists are working diligently to educate legislators and the public on the importance of continued hearing healthcare

**RESTON, Va., April 6, 2020—**As coronavirus forces the public into isolation, many of those experiencing hearing loss face magnified loneliness, fear and depression. This is particularly true for seniors.

Hearing loss alone causes many to feel isolated. Large numbers of the population experience hearing loss, according to a [2016 study by the National Institutes of Health NIDCD](https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/statistics/quick-statistics-hearing), approximately 15 percent (37.5 million) of American adults aged 20 to 69, have some trouble with hearing and approximately 28.8 million could benefit from the use of hearing aids. As the baby boomer population ages, more Americans are forced to face hearing health challenges.

COVID-19 is creating challenges for many seniors in gaining access to audiologists. The crisis has caused a myriad of economic and healthcare issues across the U.S. While huge strides have been made to expand patient access to healthcare providers via telehealth, outdated mandates still require patients to obtain a physician order to access audiology services and Medicare has not allowed audiologists to be reimbursed for telehealth services. These are significant barriers to hearing healthcare.

“Research demonstrates that untreated hearing loss in seniors is related to poor health outcomes including increasing the odds of falling,” said Catherine Palmer, Ph.D., president of the American Academy of Audiology and associate professor, University of Pittsburgh and director of Audiology for the UPMC Health System. “Individuals with even mild hearing loss are three times more risk of experiencing a fall and falls are the leading cause of fatalities in Americans over 65,” Palmer added. Research indicates that seniors with untreated hearing loss are more likely to develop cognitive decline up to 40% faster than those without hearing loss.

“The isolation that many seniors are facing right now as senior living facilities across the country have enforced a lockdown, can lead to increased feelings of isolation and depression,” Palmer explained. “Untreated hearing loss is linked to social isolation and depression as well. This is a frightening time for many seniors and communicating adequately is essential for them to interact with caregivers and to stay connected with family members.

The current healthcare crisis has served to highlight the outdated treatment of audiology services in the Medicare program. Medicare beneficiaries, arguably the precise demographic who should have unrestricted access to audiology services, first must receive a physician order before seeking the care of an audiologist. In addition, audiologists are still classified as “suppliers” even though most analogous allied health professionals are deemed “practitioners.” It is precisely this outdated classification that has impeded the ability of audiologists to provide services via telehealth during this crisis.

Medicare is an outlier with regard to its treatment of audiology services and is much more restrictive than the Department of Veterans Affairs, Medicare Advantage and most private insurances. “We want to make sure that those who need our services have access to audiologists,” Palmer added.

As National Better Hearing Month approaches, the American Academy of Audiology is working diligently with legislators and the public to ensure everyone experiencing hearing loss and hearing complications, has access to audiologists and critical hearing health care. For more information, visit [www.audiology.org](http://www.audiology.org).

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The American Academy of Audiology is the world's largest professional organization of, by and for audiologists. Representing the interests of approximately 14,000 audiologists nationwide, the Academy is dedicated to providing quality hearing care services through professional development, education, research, and increased public awareness of hearing and balance disorders. For more information or to find an audiologist, go to [www.howsyourhearing.org](http://www.howsyourhearing.org).