

“Why do they ask if I have a history of high blood pressure or diabetes when I am being seen for a hearing evaluation?”

It is widely known that cardiovascular disease affects the life of about one American every minute and that heart disease affects many health conditions. What is not realized is that this does include your hearing health as well.

The ear is composed of 3 main sections. The outer ear is the part we can see, the middle ear helps conduct sound and is related to pressure equalization; the inner ear contains the sensory cells for hearing and the balance system. There is a fourth component to hearing which is the brain and auditory processing which governs the interpretation of the sounds into speech recognition. The inner ear and central brain function are extremely sensitive to healthy blood flow.

Circulatory problems feeding blood to your ears can cause sudden sensorineural hearing loss in the inner ear. A lack of blood flow to your inner ear can result in permanent hearing loss in as little as 60 seconds! Causes of such a blockage include a partial or complete blood clot. Blood that is too thick (high cholesterol) or too thin (from medications such as heparin) can also cause disruptions in the tiny blood vessels in the inner ear.

Therefore, any cardiovascular health issue such as a family history of heart disease, aging, smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity or diabetes can potentially affect one's ability to hear.

Strokes, even minor ones, can potentially affect the auditory processing area of the brain causing a decrease in word intelligibility (clarity) even if the audibility (volume) of sounds is unaffected.

In summary, please remember that a healthy cardiovascular system- including the heart, arteries and veins- can have a positive effect on your hearing. However, unhealthy blood flow may contribute deterioration of one's ability to hear.