



3.15 Vision and hearing disorders

Vision and hearing are important senses for communication, mobility and learning. Impaired vision or hearing can have implications for education, employment, social participation and independent living.

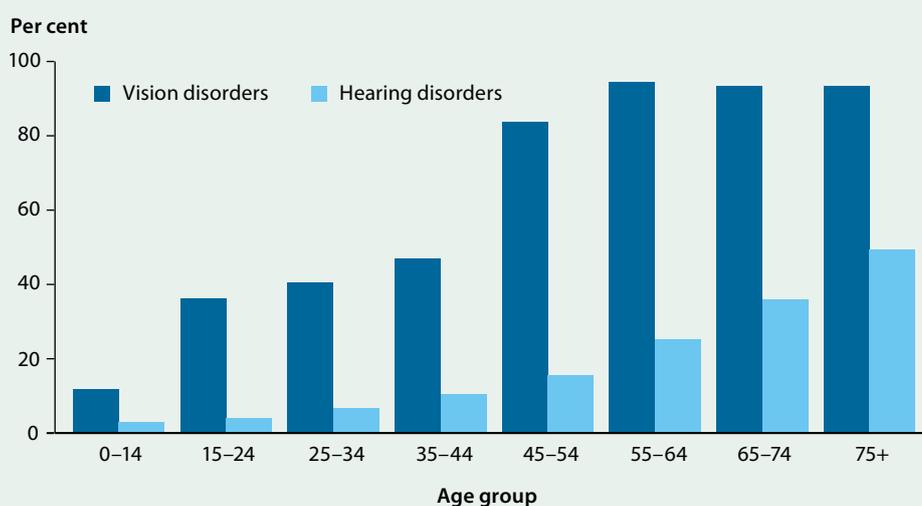
Vision disorders can be present from birth, result from an acute illness or injury, or develop over time because of chronic eye diseases and ageing (WHO 2015a). Hearing disorders can also be present from birth or develop because of an inherited condition, problems during pregnancy and delivery, infectious diseases, neurological disorders, injury or excessive noise, or develop over time with age (WHO 2015b). There is considerable variety in the types, causes and level of impairment of vision and hearing disorders.

How common are vision disorders?

Vision disorders are very common. Based on self-reported data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2014–15 National Health Survey (NHS) (ABS 2015):

- over 12 million Australians (55%) had at least one long-term vision disorder
- the proportion of people with long-term vision disorders increased with age, from 10% of children aged 0–14, to 93% of people aged 55 and over (Figure 3.15.1)
- after adjusting for differences in the age structure of the population, vision disorders were more common among females (59%) than males (51%)
- the most common long-term vision disorders were long-sightedness and short-sightedness, with 1 in 4 Australians reporting each condition
- about 421,000 Australians (1.8% of the population) had a cataract, 236,000 (1.0%) had macular degeneration, and 129,000 (0.6%) had complete or partial blindness.

Figure 3.15.1: Vision and hearing disorders, by age, 2014–15



Source: ABS 2015 (Table 3.3).



How common are hearing disorders?

Hearing disorders are less common than vision disorders but still affect many Australians. Based on self-reported data from the ABS 2014–15 NHS (ABS 2015):

- over 3 million Australians (14%) had at least one long-term hearing disorder
- the proportion of people with long-term hearing disorders increased with age, from 3% of children aged 0–14, to 49% of people aged 75 and over (Figure 3.15.1)
- after adjusting for differences in the age structure of the population, hearing disorders were more common among males (18%) than females (11%)
- the most common long-term hearing disorder in Australia was complete or partial deafness, which affected 1 in 10 Australians
- more than 1.1 million people (4.9%) had other diseases of the ear and mastoid, and 79,000 (0.3%) had otitis media (middle ear infection).

Each year in Australia, more than 500 children are born with moderate to profound permanent childhood hearing impairment (MSAC 2007).

Health service use for vision and hearing disorders

- In 2012, 1 in 2 Australians (50%) wore glasses or contact lenses and 1 in 7 (15%) wore a hearing aid (ABS 2013b).
- In 2014–15, more than 364,000 hearing devices were issued under the Hearing Services Program (Office of Hearing Services 2015).
- In 2013–14, there were 8.9 hospitalisations for cataract extraction per 1,000 Australians, and 97% were performed on a same-day basis.
- In 2014–15, there were almost 564,000 Medicare claims for diagnostic audiology services (DHS 2015).
- In 2011, there were nearly 11,000 people employed in the eye health workforce, including over 6,000 allied ophthalmic personnel (such as optical dispensers, orthoptists and occupational therapists specialising in eye health), around 4,000 optometrists and over 800 ophthalmologists (specialist eye doctors).

Vision and hearing disorders among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians experience higher rates of certain vision and hearing disorders than non-Indigenous Australians. In 2012–13, Indigenous Australians were more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous Australians to have partial or complete blindness, and more than twice as likely to have otitis media (ABS 2013a). Cataract and deafness were also more common among Indigenous Australians.

While Australia remains the only developed country with endemic trachoma (a bacterial eye infection that can lead to blindness), the rate of trachoma among 5–9 year olds in remote Indigenous communities dropped from an estimated 14% in 2009 to 4.7% in 2014 (Kirby Institute 2015).



What is missing from the picture?

Australia is a signatory to the global initiative Vision 2020—the right to sight, which aims to eliminate preventable and avoidable blindness by 2020. Due to limitations in the availability and completeness of eye health data, it is not currently possible to measure Australia's progress towards eliminating preventable and avoidable blindness. The National Eye Health Survey, led by Vision 2020 Australia and the Centre for Eye Research Australia, is under way to provide Australia's first national population-based data on the prevalence and causes of vision impairment.

Australian data on hearing disorders are similarly limited. In recognition of the importance of early diagnosis and appropriate intervention for childhood hearing loss, all states and territories have, or are implementing, infant hearing screening, with varying levels of coverage.

Where do I go for more information?

More information on eye health in Australia is available at www.aihw.gov.au/eye-health/.

References

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