

Hearing loss and tinnitus, the most common disability for veterans

Hearing loss and tinnitus are the most common disabilities that occur in the veteran population. Hearing loss is fairly self explanatory in that it is the loss of the ability to hear sounds. Tinnitus can be a ringing, buzzing, crackling or humming sound in your ears. Both of these conditions affect the person's ability to hear sounds and speech in particular.

There are three types of hearing loss: conductive hearing loss, sensorineural hearing loss and mixed hearing loss. Conductive hearing loss is caused by damage to the outer or middle ear and usually can be repaired or will heal over time. It is usually caused by temporary factors, including illnesses or some medications used to treat other conditions, and does not usually result in total hearing loss.

Sensorineural hearing loss is caused by damage to the inner ear (cochlea) or the retrocochlea nerves (nerves that connect the ear to the brain). Sensorineural hearing loss can be caused by many things, but the primary cause for veterans is unprotected noise exposure and head trauma.

Noise-induced hearing loss is caused by sustained exposure to dangerous levels of sound. Anything above 85 decibels for a prolonged time will most likely cause hearing damage eventually. High-frequency hearing loss is normally the first symptom of this type of noise-induced hearing loss. An inability to hear high-pitched voices and sounds are a sign that you may have noise induced hearing loss. For example, the voices of women and children are hard to hear for a person with noise-induced hearing loss.

In the military noise exposure is common. Using a rifle or fire arm in the service will generate decibels in the 150 decibel range. Artillery is upwards of the 185 decibel range and jet engines will give out 140 decibels. Most veterans have been exposed to these types of decibels for an extended period of time. Aircraft carriers, flight line jobs, infantry, artillery and naval ship engine rooms are some of the loudest environments in the military. Combat veterans are usually exposed to extended periods of auditory trauma from the noises of war.

Until the mid-1970s very little hearing protection was used in the military. In the 1960s going to the rifle range for hours and shooting hundreds of rounds with absolutely no hearing protection was normal. Today the military is very conscious of noise exposure. Service members are provided the best hearing protection available and are tested regularly if they are in a high noise environment.

If you were exposed to high levels of auditory trauma while you were in the military and have developed tinnitus since the service time or a documented hearing loss, we recommend that you come into our office. You will need to bring your DD-214 (discharge) and some type of diagnosis that you do have hearing loss. A letter from your spouse will not be sufficient. A hearing test from a hearing center or your physician is recommended.

Ted Puntillo is director of Veteran Services for Solano County. Reach him at 784-6950 or TEPuntillo@SolanoCounty.com. The Solano County Veteran Services Office, 675 Texas St. in Fairfield, is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m.