

Hello, am I deaf?

Free phone-based hearing test
available from tomorrow

By POON CHIAN HUI

A FIVE-MINUTE call will determine how deaf you are, when the National University of Singapore (NUS) rolls out its free telephone hearing test tomorrow.

It aims to chart the extent of aural problems at a time when public hospitals are treating more patients who have trouble hearing.

All calls are free but they have to be made from a landline phone. The service (MEGA-1188 or 6342-1188) will run until July 31 but could be made permanent in the future.

Of particular concern is a small but growing group of young people with "bad habits" such as blasting music through their earphones. Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), for instance, is starting to see more youngsters showing up for hearing tests and hearing aids, said Dr Ho Eu Chin, an ear,

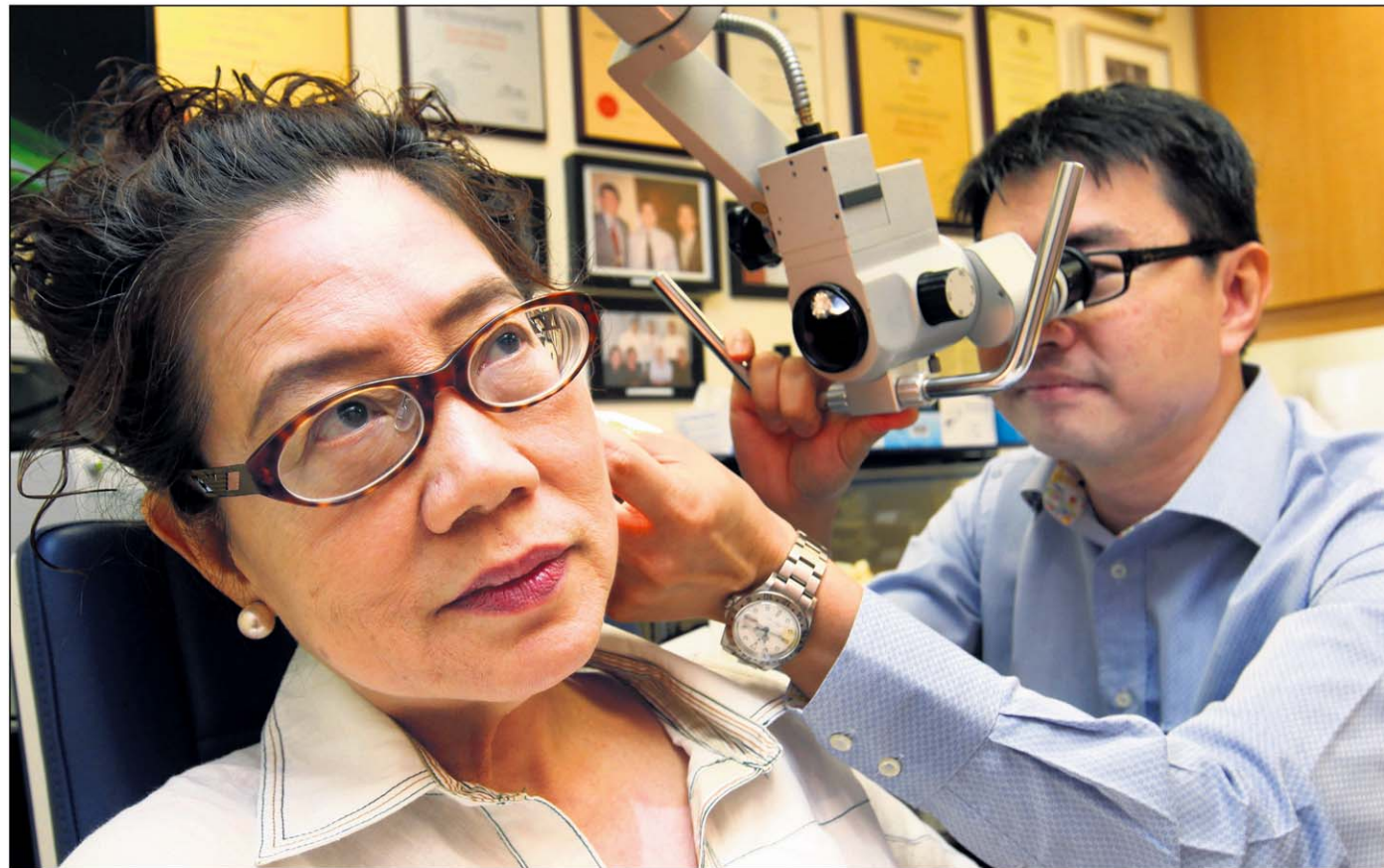
nose and throat (ENT) specialist.

Some 7,892 patients aged 18 to 90 took hearing tests at the hospital last year, a 10 per cent rise from 2010. Dr Ho believes many people are unaware they have a problem and do not realise they are picking up fewer sounds.

Changi General Hospital's (CGH) Dr Yuen Heng Wai, also an ENT specialist, said most people begin to notice they have a problem only when they cannot hear what is being said during daily conversations.

From 2008 to last year, referrals to CGH for hearing tests climbed by 5 per cent every year. Most were elderly people with age-related hearing loss, the major type of problem here.

Some damage their hearing in noisy work environments, Dr Ho said. One of them is hairstylist Lily Liao, 62, who started going deaf two decades ago and now cannot hear in her right ear.



"The hairdryer is so loud... but clients still insist on talking over it," lamented Madam Liao. She had a cochlear implant two years ago at CGH, and is due to be fitted with a hearing aid for her left ear.

Such noise-induced hearing loss is set to get worse, said Asso-

CGH's Dr Yuen (above, right) examining hairstylist Lily Liao, whose hearing loss was due to noise at work. Madam Hamida (left) ignored her hearing loss, only to find out later it was due to a tumour. ST PHOTOS: LAU FOOK KONG, RAJ NADARAJAN

ciate Professor Lynne Lim, head of National University Hospital's centre for hearing intervention and language development.

Another worrying trend is that more elderly people are seeking help too late, noted Singapore General Hospital's (SGH) Dr Barrie Tan. By the time they are referred to the hospital, many already have severe to profound hearing loss, so hearing aids can no longer help.

Instead, these patients require special implants, said the head of the otolaryngology department at SGH, which has seen a 13 per cent rise in the number of hearing tests over the past five years.

Hearing loss is irreversible, yet people remain resistant to hearing aids, added Dr Yuen. At CGH, only 4.8 per cent of the 4,738 patients who had hearing tests last

year got fitted for the devices. At SGH, only 550 out of 11,600 patients bought a hearing aid.

Prof Lim, who is running the NUS research, hopes the telephone test will help to shed light on such attitudes. Researchers will interview at least 1,670 callers on topics such as why they are unwilling to use hearing aids.

Halal food inspector Hamida Pagi, 52, said making such tests more accessible is helpful, given that hearing loss can signal more serious ailments. She neglected her hearing problem for four years, only to find out it was caused by a tumour in her head.

She has since undergone two operations at TTSH. Her advice: "Hearing is important, it affects family and work life. Don't wait until it's too late."

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How the test works

CRANKING up the volume will not help during the telephone hearing test.

The five-minute test uses background noise, so turning up the volume will also increase the noise, making other sounds no easier to decipher.

Lines will stay open until July 31. After that, NUS' Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, which is behind the initiative, will interview callers on issues affecting their hearing and gauge views on using hearing aids.

The computer-assisted phone system, developed with SingTel, has been tested on 577 people and proved accurate in eight out of 10 cases. Callers will be asked to do the following:

- Choose a language – English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil – to proceed in.
- Key in an NRIC number.
- Provide basic details such as age and gender.
- When sets of three numbers are read out with noise in the background they will be told to key in the numbers accordingly.
- This will go on 27 times for each ear. If the caller's hearing is weak, the volume of each number set goes up.
- Once both ears have been tested, callers will be told if their hearing is normal, below average, or bad.

The researchers stress that the test is a screening tool, and that people should seek medical help if they suspect any problems.

Calls are free. To get screened, call MEGA-1188 (6342-1188).

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