

Writer Barney Calman had special ear plugs fitted to simulate hearing loss

Have you ever been to a packed Christmas party and struggled to hear what people are saying – even though they appear to be speaking loudly? You may suffer from the annoying ‘cocktail party syndrome’ – and this is the prime time of year for things to come to a head.

Around nine million Britons are deaf or hard of hearing. It can occur at any age, but the majority are over 50, and more than 70 per cent over 70 suffer to some degree.

Many are not even aware they have a problem, according to Specsavers audiologist Mark Edgar. Patients he sees have suffered for many years without treatment.

‘Although it can happen suddenly as a result of trauma, such as a blow to the head, a very loud noise or an infection, hearing loss usually happens gradually,’ says Edgar.

‘Many sufferers do not realise they have a problem and only seek help when friends become so annoyed at having to repeat themselves that they force them to visit a hearing specialist.

‘Hearing loss makes differentiating sounds in noisy environments particularly difficult. We get an influx of patients who first notice their difficulties over Christmas.’

I find the idea of losing my hearing terrifying. I play various instruments, including guitar in a band – something I have done since my early teens.

But if my love of music is actually harming my ears, it is highly likely that I will suffer hearing loss. So it was with trepidation that I agreed when Specsavers challenged me to go deaf for a day – thanks to specially moulded earplugs that would simulate hearing loss.

All Specsavers audiologists are encouraged to wear the plugs as part of their training, to help them understand what the world sounds like to those who are going deaf. They hope my experience of hearing loss will encourage others to seek help.

I arrive at Specsavers, but before Edgar fits my earplugs, I am given a hearing test. This involves sitting in a soundproof booth and pressing a button every time I hear a tone of various pitches and volumes through headphones.

Hearing loss is defined according to the quietest sounds, measured in decibels, which can be heard. Mild hearing loss can cause difficulty following speech, mainly in noisy situations. The quietest sounds you can hear are 25 to 39 decibels – a whisper. Those with moderate deafness find the quietest sounds they can hear are 40 to 69 decibels, the level of normal conversation. Those with severe deafness rely on



DALE CHERRY

I'M ALL EARS: Barney struggles at a business dinner and, below, also found it hard to communicate at work

a cab and notice the driver winces as I yell my destination, unable to judge the volume of my own voice.

I feel oddly disconnected. It is not unpleasant, just strange.

Back at my desk, the bustle and noise of the office is blanked out and I concentrate on work far more easily. I think I'm doing pretty well until I realise I have been ignoring my boss for the past couple of minutes. Some voices, I discover, are much harder to hear than others. It seems to have nothing to do with the pitch, or whether they are male or female.

In music they call the ‘colour’ of a sound the timbre, and this quality seems to make my boss incomprehensible. Even when she is speaking loudly I have to ask her to repeat herself (I'm not sure who is more irritated by this). ‘It's going to be a long day,’ deadpans a colleague which, oddly, I hear perfectly.

I continue to alternate between shouting and mumbling, much to everyone's amusement, and by mid-afternoon I am doing no better. ‘It's like trying

to talk to my mother,’

says another colleague in exasperation. ‘There's a delay before you answer.’

I have to take a second or so to mentally process what a person says before I can reply, and it is exhausting.

After work, I have a business dinner with a PR at a busy Central London restaurant. With the loud chattering and clinking around me it is even harder to make out my companion's voice. By the end of the meal, which takes a long time

as I have to stop eating to concentrate fully to hear, I am drained from focusing so hard.

On my walk home I yank out the earplugs, and everything is crystal clear – I can hear the crunch of my shoes on the wet pavement, the rustle of leaves, cars and sirens in the distance. It is such a relief.

It is not dramatic or awful being a bit hard of hearing, but you do miss out on so much. And I would hate to get to the point where I am annoying everyone around me. If I start to notice problems, I won't put off seeking help.

● www.specsavers.co.uk/hearing

Deaf for the day



lip-reading, even with a hearing aid, as the quietest sounds they hear are 70 to 94 decibels – loud shouting.

‘Within the inner ear is a structure, called the cochlea, which is lined with sound-sensitive hair cells,’ explains Edgar. ‘Noises cause these tiny hairs to vibrate, stimulating the auditory nerve and sending messages to the brain, where they are interpreted as sound. We all have a finite number of hair cells and once they die, they are not replaced.’

‘They die as a natural part of ageing, but how quickly this happens depends on exposure to loud noises – which can prematurely damage

the hair cells – over a lifetime.’ I am reassured that despite a misspent youth with my electric guitar turned up to 11, my hearing is normal for a 31-year-old.

The earplugs I am going to wear are made of blue putty which is injected harmlessly into the ear canal and then hardens. I feel a faint pressure. And then silence.

I had half expected to panic, feel trapped and tear them out immediately but it is actually relaxing. It's like covering your ears with the palms of your hands. While looking in the mirror at what appear to be large bits of Blu-Tack in my ears, I become

aware of a murmuring, turn around and realise Edgar has been talking to me. Standing just a few metres away, I cannot make out his voice at all. As we say our goodbyes I have to focus on what he is saying – it becomes tiring almost immediately.

Would I break down in frustration or wander into fast-moving traffic?

Edgware Road is one of the busiest highways in London, yet despite the rush-hour traffic, the world is eerily quiet as I step on to the street. I can't even hear my own footsteps.

I worried about crossing roads but this is something you really use your eyes rather than ears for. I flag down

5 of the best luxury medicated soaps

Cold weather – combined with drying central heating – can sap moisture from the skin, making it prone to flaking and chapping. This can be aggravated by hand-washing, leading to seasonal eczema-type symptoms. There is a variety of hand and body soaps made with high-quality oils and herbal extracts that cleanse and protect the skin. Here are five medicated options that should soothe even the most sensitive.



1 Gamila Secret Soothing Geranium Soap, 115g – £20

Olive-oil blended with six other vegetable oils, and eight herbal extracts. Suitable for those with skin problems – advocates claim it can soothe the symptoms of eczema and psoriasis. www.vitahealthcare.com



2 Weleda Calendula Soap, 100g – £4.95

Soothing extracts of calendula and organic chamomile help to maintain the skin's natural moisture balance. Suitable for babies as well as children and adults. www.weleda.co.uk

3 Tisserand Aromatherapy Anti-Bacterial Pure Vegetable Soap, 100g – £3.79

Made using organic palm and coconut oils, this soap contains tea-tree oil, a natural antibacterial, and sea-buckthorn oil, to heal and protect skin. www.lloydspharmacy.com



4 Miller Harris Citron Citron, 100g – £9

Made with citrus oils, which are powerful antibacterials, this soap is blended with shea butter and glycerine – both of which are excellent emollient agents to moisturise. www.millerharris.com

5 Le Petit Olivier with Royal Jelly, 100g – £2.34

Royal jelly is a honey-bee secretion used in the nutrition of larvae, which some studies suggest may have anti-inflammatory, wound-healing and antibiotic effects. www.lepetitolivier.com

