

# WORLD REPORT ON HEARING



World report on hearing: executive summary  
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# WORLD REPORT **ON HEARING**

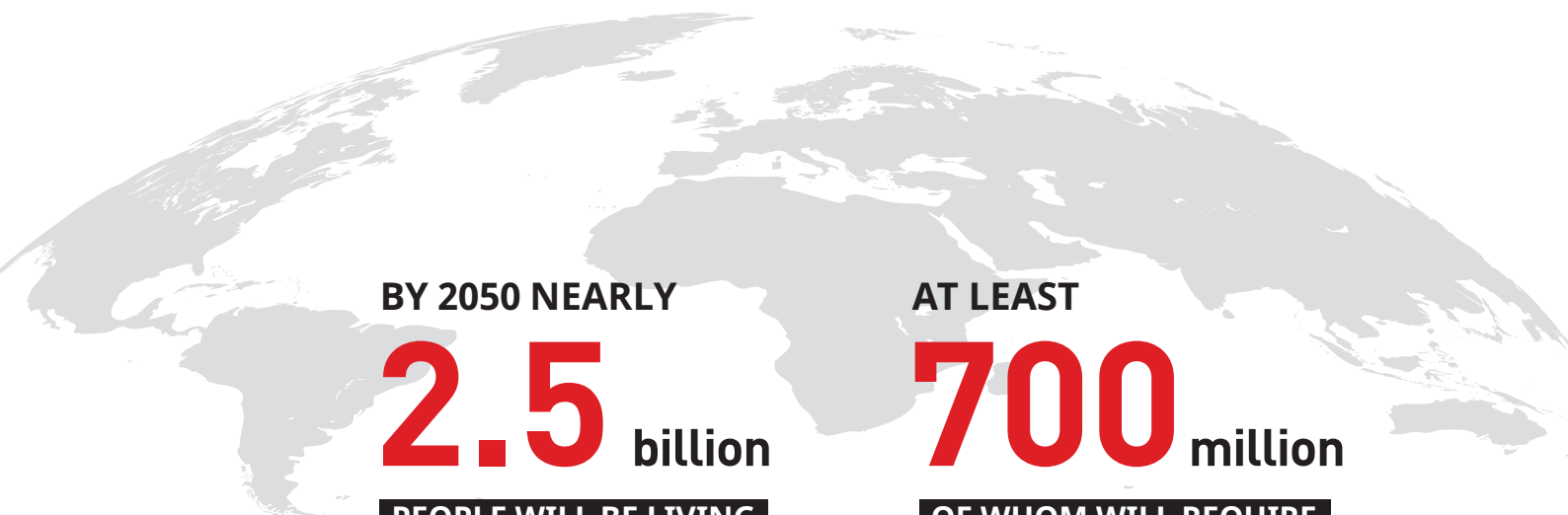
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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The World report on hearing envisions a world in which no individual experiences hearing loss due to preventable causes, and those with hearing loss can achieve their full potential through rehabilitation, education and empowerment.

.....



BY 2050 NEARLY

**2.5** billion

**PEOPLE WILL BE LIVING  
WITH SOME DEGREE  
OF HEARING LOSS**

AT LEAST

**700** million

**OF WHOM WILL REQUIRE  
REHABILITATION  
SERVICES**

WHO estimates that by 2050 nearly 2.5 billion people will be living with some degree of hearing loss, at least 700 million of whom will require rehabilitation services. Failure to act will be costly in terms of the health and well-being of those affected, and the financial losses arising from their exclusion from communication, education and employment.

At this time especially, when the world is faced with the devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, investing efforts and resources to prevent and address hearing loss is warranted for several reasons:

- Many cases of hearing loss can be prevented through effective and available measures. With more than 1 billion young people at risk of avoidable hearing loss, and around 200 million suffering with preventable or treatable chronic ear infections, this gives cause for urgent action.
- Innovative, cost-effective technological and clinical solutions can improve the lives of most individuals with hearing loss. Millions are already benefitting from these developments. Combining the power of technology with sound public health strategies can ensure that these benefits reach all, especially those in underserved and remote areas of the world.
- The lockdowns precipitated by COVID-19 have highlighted the importance of hearing, and the need for ear and hearing care. When deprived of visual and social contact, the sense of hearing allows us to remain connected.
- At the current rate of prevalence, nearly 1 trillion International dollars are lost annually from unaddressed hearing loss. Unless action is taken, this figure will continue to rise in the coming decades. At the same time, investment in ear and hearing care has been shown to be cost-effective, and governments can expect a return of nearly 16 International dollars for every 1 dollar invested.
- This phase in the world's history, with all governments and global agencies focused on public health and health-systems strengthening, presents a unique opportunity to integrate ear and hearing care into health systems. Integration at this time will benefit millions of people at risk of, or living with, hearing loss, bring financial gains to countries, and advance the global vision of universal health coverage.

This first-ever *World report on hearing* elaborates these points and presents an imperative call to action. It summarizes the current status and extent of ear and hearing problems, the causative and preventive factors of hearing loss, and cost-effective clinical and public health solutions. The report acknowledges the challenges of implementation, shares potential solutions, and provides direction on the way forward through integration within universal health coverage. The report is structured into four sections with three annexes providing quality of evidence, and details both of the indicators and of the cost-effectiveness of ear and hearing care interventions.

## SECTION 1

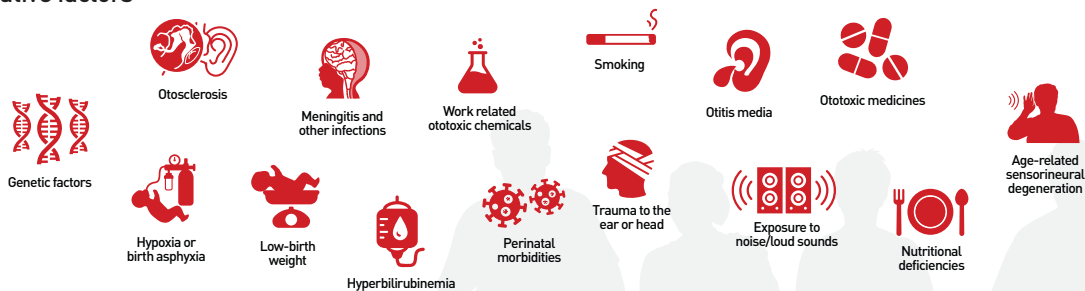
# THE IMPORTANCE OF HEARING ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE



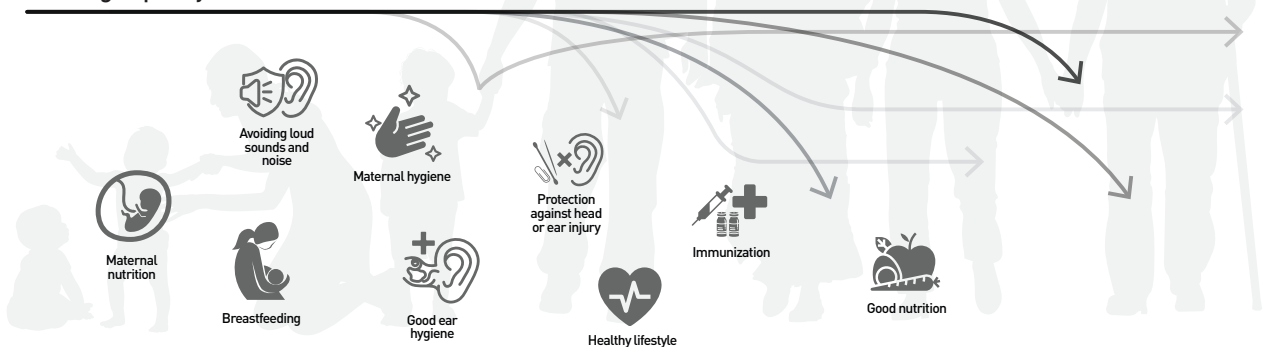
The sense of hearing is a key aspect of functioning at all stages of life; and its loss, unless appropriately addressed, impacts society as a whole.

## HEARING ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

### Causative factors



### Hearing capacity



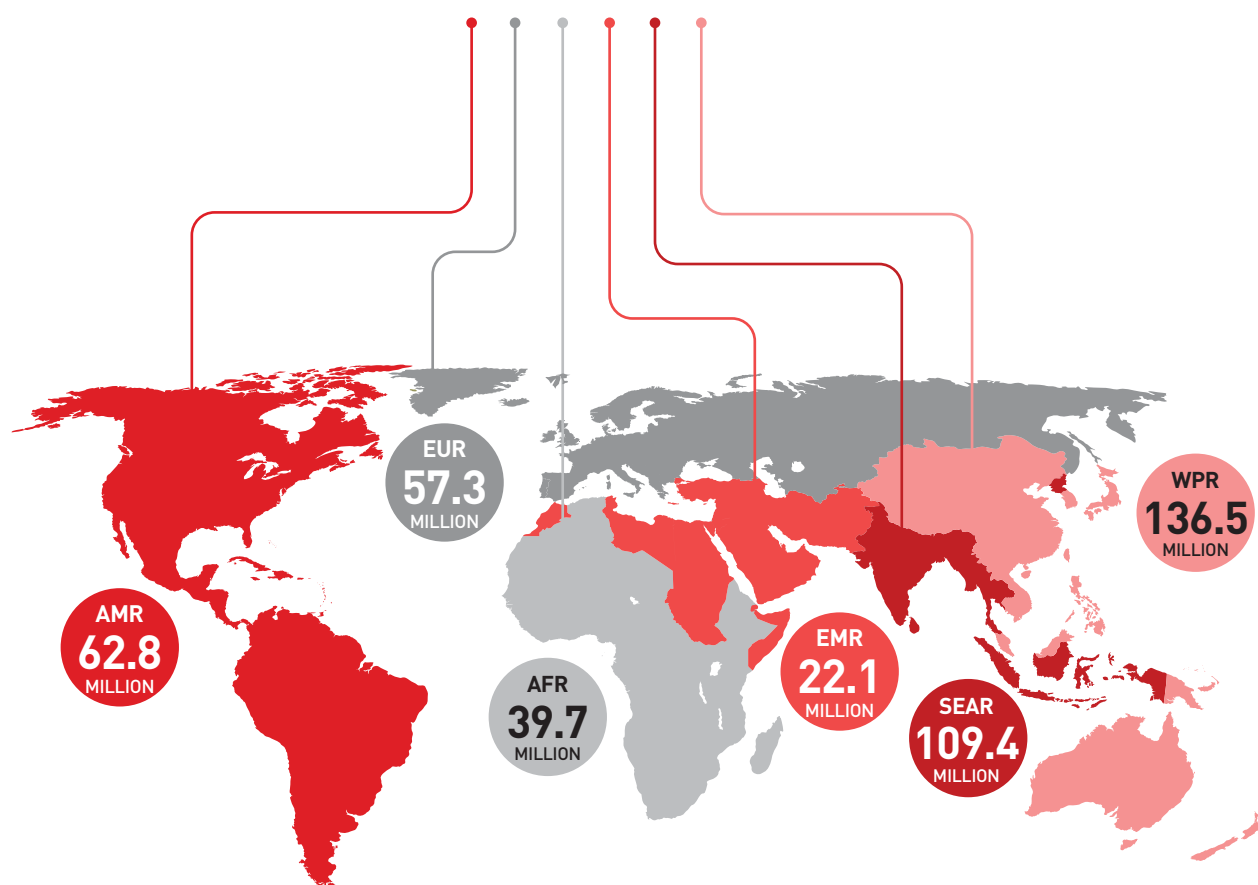
### Protective factors

Every individual has a unique hearing trajectory that is shaped by genetic characteristics and influenced by biological, behavioural and environmental factors experienced throughout the life course. Hearing capacity results from the interplay between negative (causative) and positive (protective) influences. Causative factors that impact the hearing capacity range from birth-related adverse events and ear infections, to viral infections, noise exposure, ototoxic medicines and lifestyle choices. Many of these can be prevented throughout the life course by following good ear hygiene, avoiding loud sounds and adopting healthy lifestyles.

Currently, around

# 430 million

people globally require  
rehabilitation services  
for their hearing loss



Note: This illustration represents WHO regions, not country boundaries.

When measured audiometrically, hearing thresholds greater than 20 dB denote clinical hearing loss. Hearing loss currently affects more than 1.5 billion people worldwide, of whom 430 million have moderate or higher levels of hearing loss in the better hearing ear, and are more likely to be adversely affected unless the condition is addressed in a timely manner. This epidemiological measure excludes single-sided and mild hearing loss which also pose significant challenges and require care based on the level of difficulty experienced. Rather than being determined solely by severity, the impact of hearing loss is measured largely by the effectiveness of the clinical or rehabilitative interventions adopted, and the extent to which the environment is responsive to the needs of those with hearing loss.

Hearing loss if unaddressed, can impact negatively many aspects of life: communication; the development of language and speech in children; cognition; education; employment; mental health; and interpersonal relationships.

## SECTION 2

# SOLUTIONS ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE: HEARING LOSS CAN BE ADDRESSED



Effective and timely interventions can benefit all those at risk of, or living with, hearing loss.

Hearing loss is preventable throughout the life course through effective public health interventions. **In children, almost 60% of hearing loss is due to causes that can be prevented** through measures such as immunization, improved maternal and neonatal care, and screening for, and early management of, otitis media. In adults, legislation on noise control and safe listening, and surveillance of ototoxicity can help maintain hearing trajectories and reduce the potential for hearing loss.

Identification is the first step in addressing hearing loss and related ear diseases. Clinical screening at strategic points of life ensure that these conditions can be identified at the earliest possible stage. Recent technological advances, including accurate and easy-to-use tools, can identify ear disease and hearing loss at any age, in clinical or community settings, and with limited training and resources. Screening can even take place in difficult situations such as those encountered during the current COVID19 pandemic.

### HEARING LOSS CAN BE ADDRESSED THROUGH SYSTEMATIC SCREENING TO IDENTIFY HEARING LOSS EARLY IN



Newborn babies and infants

Pre-school and school-age children

People exposed to noise or chemicals at work

People receiving ototoxic medicines

Older adults

Once diagnosed, early intervention is the key to successful outcomes. Medical and surgical treatment can cure most ear diseases, potentially reversing the associated hearing loss. However, where hearing loss is irreversible, rehabilitation can ensure that those affected, and society at large, avoid the adverse consequences. Significant progress has been made during the past decades in this respect, and a range of effective options are now available to address the needs and preferences of people with hearing loss.

Hearing technology, such as hearing aids and cochlear implants are effective and cost-effective and can benefit children and adults alike. However, it is essential that their use is accompanied by appropriate support services and rehabilitative therapy to ensure the desired outcomes, and that any decisions relating to treatment and rehabilitation follow a person-centred approach and involve the individual's family or carers. The use of sign language and other means of sensory substitution (such as speech reading) are also valuable options for many deaf people; hearing assistive technology and services (such as captioning and sign language interpretation) can further improve access to communication and education for those with hearing loss.

#### **TIMELY AND APPROPRIATE CARE CAN ENSURE THAT PEOPLE WITH EAR DISEASES OR HEARING LOSS HAVE THE CHANCE TO ACHIEVE THEIR FULL POTENTIAL**



Medicines and surgery



Hearing aids and implants



Rehabilitative therapy



Sign language access



Hearing assistive technology



Captioning services

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