



Christine Michael gives the ear care market a good hearing and also looks at hearing loss

The most important problem affecting ear health is of course hearing loss – according to the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID), there are nearly 9m deaf or hard-of-hearing people in the UK, many of whom may wait years before seeking professional help. Although few independent pharmacies have the resources to offer hearing tests in-store, RNID suggests they still have a valuable role to play. “Pharmacies could provide computers terminals for the public to access our online or telephone hearing check,” says Angela King, senior audiology specialist at RNID.

Stocking a wide range of earplugs is also important, adds King, especially as young people may be unaware of how easily exposure to loud music can damage hearing. “One of the most helpful things pharmacies can provide is easy-to-follow information leaflets for

customers on ear care and ear problems, protecting their hearing and what to do if their hearing is deteriorating.”

One consequence of noise damage can be tinnitus. Many sufferers find that specialist relaxation products, such as CDs, pillow speakers and sound enrichment devices ease their symptoms; RNID is the UK’s largest supplier of these, including to pharmacies.

Wax works

For treating other ear problems, by far the most popular products are ear drops to soften hardened wax to help with its removal. According to the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), about 2.3m people in the UK have ear wax problems each year, and about 4m ears are syringed at an estimated cost of £11m to the NHS.

The ear care market overall is worth £7.8m, with 2.1m units sold annually, and is growing by 3% year on year, according to IMS Data (December 2010). Ear drops account for 81% of sales, worth £6.3m with 1.8m units sold. OTC products for ear wax include those with urea hydrogen peroxide as their active ingredient, such as Otex and Earex Advance, and oil-based products such as Earex, Care, Cerumol and Earol.

The leading brand is Otex, which claims a 34% share of the ear care market. Antonia Rollins, brand manager for Otex at supplier Dendron, says that customers value the product’s claim that it is clinically proven to reduce the

Hearing loss in the UK in numbers

▶ Total number of deaf and hard of hearing people	8.95m
▶ % of over-70s with hearing loss	70
▶ % of over-50s with hearing loss	41.7
▶ Number of children under 15 with significant hearing loss	20,000
▶ Number of people who use hearing aids	2m
▶ Number of people who could benefit from a hearing aid	4m
▶ Average number of years before people with hearing loss seek help	10
▶ Number of adults who have experienced tinnitus	4.7m
▶ Number of adults whose tinnitus seriously affects their quality of life	470,000

Source: RNID www.rnid.org.uk

need for syringing and that this makes it a 'must stock' for pharmacies. "Research suggests that first-time sufferers tend to contact their GP, sometimes with associated ear infections, but that on subsequent occasions they usually self-treat with OTC products."

Thornton & Ross, which markets Care Olive Oil Eardrops and Cerumol, notes that olive oil product sales have grown by 159% year on year and now account for £1.5m of sales. Cerumol has been recently launched as an olive oil product alongside the original arachis oil brand.

"Our research shows that 85% of practice nurses are likely to recommend olive oil products as a first treatment for excessive ear wax," says a spokesperson.

Earol, meanwhile, is an olive oil product delivered in a fine spray, and was developed by practice nurses who found that patients advised to use olive oil often returned to the surgery having been unable to comply. "Earol delivers a controlled dose without the need for a cotton wool stopper or for anyone else to help," says Michael Hill, managing director of supplier HL Healthcare.

Audiclean Total Ear Care Solution from Passion For Life is aimed at parents of babies and young children and is another recent launch in this market. It comprises an ear wax softener containing apricot and eucalyptus oils, and a spray ear-cleaning wash, and retails at £8.99.

Hill notes that TV advertising campaigns by leading brands tend to boost consumer interest in the ear care category, presenting an opportunity for pharmacies to give more prominence to their ranges. News stories about research into hearing loss may also prompt customers to ask about supplements, such as omega-3 fish oils, which an



OUTDOORS, UNDERWATER AND IN THE AIR

Summer is the season for outdoor activities and foreign holidays – and for pharmacies, time to pay special attention to ear care, as customers are more likely to report ear problems caused by allergies, swimming and air travel.

One in five Britons suffers from hay fever, according to Asthma, Allergy and Inflammation Research, and for some people an unpleasant side effect is dulled hearing. Deafness Research UK (DRUK) suggests

that recommending an anti-inflammatory nasal spray, such as Flixonase or Beconase (both from GSK) or Merck's Nasonex, alongside antihistamine treatment, can ease the problem.

Swimmer's ear (otitis externa) is much more common in warm weather as more people are exposed to waterborne infection, says Angela Chalmers, a pharmacist at Boots. Earplugs designed for swimming can help prevent the condition; other products include Swim-Ear from Co-Pharma, which is used after swimming to remove trapped water, and Earol Swim Tea Tree Oil, a new launch from HL Healthcare, which is used before swimming and delivers a controlled dose of olive oil and tea tree oil in a fine spray. It comes in a polypropylene carry case and is aimed at serious swimmers and divers.

EarCalm Spray, a GSK product, contains acetic acid and can be used to treat mild outer ear infections.

DRUK research shows that over a third of people have suffered ear pain during flights. Travel earplugs, such as EarPlanes from Cirrus Healthcare, can help prevent problems, and for children DRUK suggests a saline nasal decongestant spray. Calpol Soothe & Care saline nasal spray is also suitable for adults. Chalmers also recommends Otovent, a balloon device from Kestrel Medical that is used for treating glue ear to help prevent pain during flight and clear blocked ears after landing.

Australian study last year suggested might help to prevent or delay age-related hearing loss. Claims are also made for ginkgo biloba, zinc, melatonin and vitamin B12 in reducing tinnitus symptoms, although RNID says currently the only evidence for complementary therapies is for relaxation products.

About 200,000 children in the UK each year suffer from repeated ear infections or glue ear, according to Deafness Research UK (DRUK). "Ear infections are normal; 80% of children get them by the age of three," says Ian Williamson, DRUK's medical adviser. "An important thing pharmacists can do is to reinforce to parents when antibiotics are actually needed – not at all for glue ear and probably only about 20% of cases with acute otitis media – and that symptoms should settle in response to antipyretics or analgesics." DRUK has a leaflet, 'Ear infections and glue ear: a guide for families', which pharmacies can order from its website (www.deafnessresearch.org). It aims to inform parents about mild ear infections and how to look out for signs of rare but serious complications.

TIPS FOR BETTER UNDERSTANDING

Many pharmacy customers have hearing difficulties – RNID offers these tips to make communication easier:

- ▶ **Talk to customers in a quiet place with good light and acoustics**
- ▶ **Face the customer before you start to speak**
- ▶ **Avoid having your back to the light**
- ▶ **Make sure your face and lips are clearly visible**
- ▶ **Speak clearly and a fraction more slowly than normal; do not shout**
- ▶ **If the customer doesn't understand, try rephrasing**
- ▶ **Be prepared to write things down**
- ▶ **Finger spelling is easier to learn than sign language and can be useful for communicating with profoundly deaf people**
- ▶ **Counter induction loops can be helpful, but may not overcome confidentiality issues**
- ▶ **Train all staff to raise their awareness of hearing loss**