- Hearing

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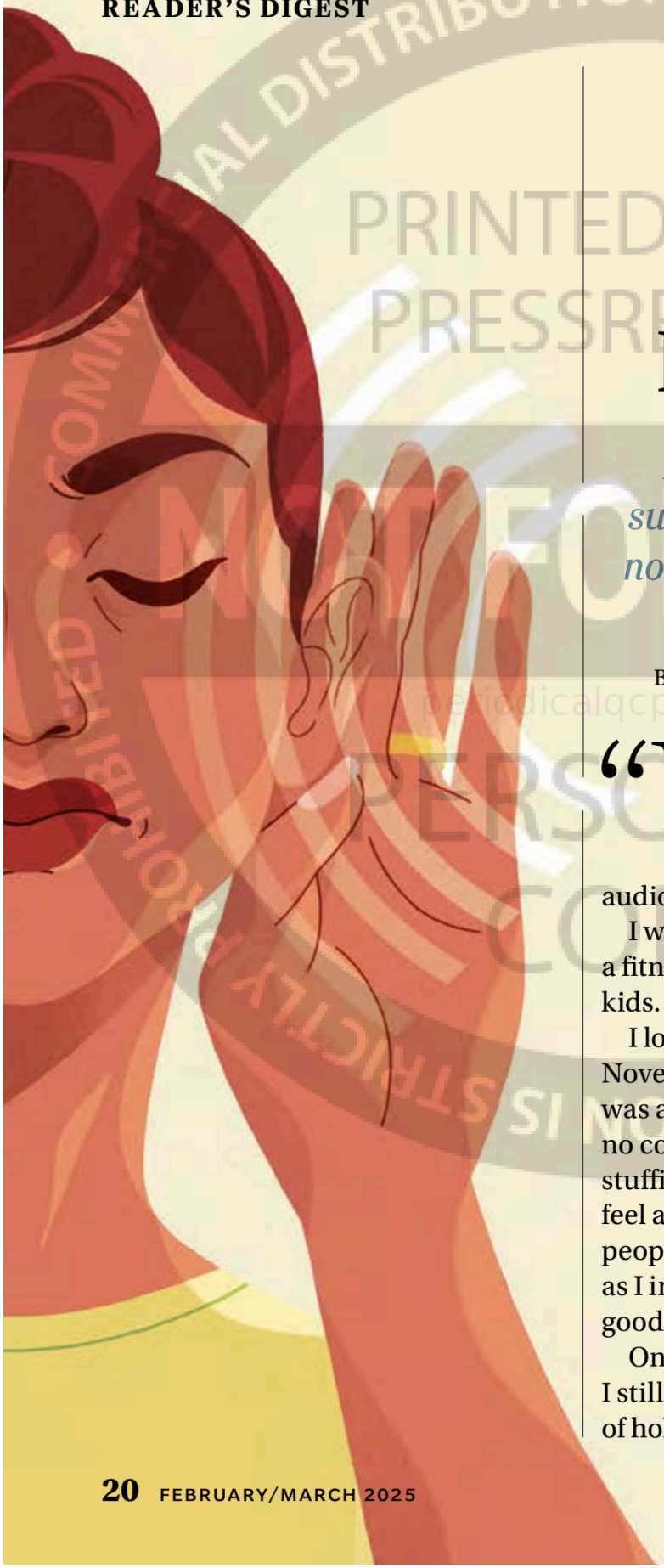

HEALTH

Now Hear This

Losing your hearing suddenly, even if there is no pain, is always urgent

BY *Charlotte Hilton Andersen*

"You've lost about 60 per cent of your hearing in your right ear and it's permanent," said the audiologist.

I was 45 years old and healthy. I am a fitness instructor. A wife, with five kids. How had this happened?

I lost my hearing overnight. In November 2023, I got what I thought was a head cold. No fever, no pain, no cough – just some congestion and stuffiness that made my right ear feel as if it was underwater. I told people it was probably a sinus thing as I instructed them to "talk to my good ear".

One month went by, then two, and I still couldn't hear well, but because of holiday busyness I didn't get it

ILLUSTRATIONS: KATE TRAYNOR

checked out. It wasn't until the end of January, when I went to an ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist for an unrelated issue, that I mentioned it. The specialist looked at me in alarm and told me to make an appointment for a hearing test the next day.

"With any type of sudden hearing loss, time is of the essence – and it's a pretty short time frame," says Dr Courtney Voelker, a neurotologist (an ENT doctor who specialises in hearing). "When caught early, it's very treatable. After that, your chances of being treated successfully diminish quickly."

I had waited three months. It was too late.

I was diagnosed with idiopathic sudden sensorineural hearing loss (SSHL). That's medical speak for 'suddenly losing your hearing for no apparent reason'. Within weeks I was the proud owner of a new hearing aid, and my life had changed forever.

WHAT IS SUDDEN HEARING LOSS?

Sudden hearing loss is defined as a change in hearing that affects three frequencies or more and happens in 72 hours or less, says Dr Nicole Raia, a senior clinical audiologist. The symptoms can be subtle: in addition to the hearing loss, people may experience tinnitus (ringing in the ear), severe vertigo or a feeling of stuffiness in the ear, but it's not uncommon to have no other symptoms or very minor ones, she says. It's more common not to experience no pain.

The most likely cause of my hearing loss was a viral infection in my inner ear that damaged my cochlea, the part of the ear responsible for translating sound vibrations from the environment into information for the brain.

There are other causes for sudden hearing loss, which is divided into two types: conductive and sensorineural.

Conductive hearing loss comes from wax or other obstructions in the ear canal, a ruptured eardrum ("Don't stick cotton buds in your ears!" Dr Voelker cautions) or a middle ear infection. These causes are often simple to diagnose and treat, and the hearing loss is rarely permanent.

On the other hand, sensorineural hearing loss is usually caused by a viral infection in the inner ear. Less often, it's caused by a bacterial infection or a benign tumour on the auditory nerve. These are treatable if you catch them early, she says.

If you have sudden hearing loss, see a doctor immediately. Dr Raia recommends starting with your general practitioner, as they can rule out or treat things like ear wax. If you're still having hearing issues, ask for an urgent referral to an ENT for a medical check and an audiologist for a hearing assessment. If you do have SSHL, it's important to get a hearing aid – and wear it.

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