Canadian Audiologist
The Official Publication of the Canadian Academy of Audiology

Clinician’s Corner

Published April 8th, 2025

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Why Is February So Slow?

If you work in an Audiology clinic, you may have noticed a recurring trend: January and February can be unusually quiet. After the flurry of appointments in the fall and early winter, things seem to grind to a halt. Our waiting rooms seem to empty out. The phones ring less. The calendars open up. Why is February so slow?

Is it the weather? In most parts of Canada, winter is in full force by February. Cold, icy conditions

make it harder, and likely, less appealing, for patients to venture out, especially older adults or those with mobility concerns. A hearing test or a hearing aid follow-up might not feel “essential” enough to justify braving the cold and the snow. So, they postpone. But it’s not just the weather. There seems to be a broader post-holiday lull at play. After the flurry of December social activities - family dinners, parties, travel, etc., people tend to hunker down in January. People retreat, budgets tighten, and priorities shift. For private-pay clinics, financial timing is likely a significant factor. OHIP does not cover audiology services, and December is a heavy-spending month for many patients. By January, wallets will be lighter, credit card bills will be arriving, and healthcare spending that isn’t urgent tends to be deferred.

On top of fewer bookings, we also tend to see the highest rate of cancellations and no-shows during January and February. Bad weather is a frequent culprit, but the issue goes deeper; many patients book optimistically during the holiday season, only to lose momentum or reprioritize once the New Year begins. The new year’s energy can bring resolutions about health and wellness, but hearing care doesn’t always make the list, as it is still under-recognized as a key part of overall health and quality of life. Cold and flu season can also lead to last-minute rescheduling. This unpredictability makes it hard to plan staff schedules and meet monthly targets, compounding the effects of the seasonal dip.

So What Can We Do?

First, it’s helpful to acknowledge that this seasonal slowdown isn’t unique to audiology (CIHI, 2020). Many healthcare clinics, especially those in private practice or offering non-emergency services, experience a dip in January and February. Dentists, physiotherapists, and optometrists all feel the chill of the winter slump.

Do these slow months then offer an opportunity for us to be more proactive in raising hearing health awareness as an industry? Probably. Here are a few strategies to consider:

1. **Raise Awareness Early and Often**
   Use November and December to plant seeds. Patients may be more receptive to hearing care when actively engaging in social situations and noticing communication challenges. Encourage them to book their follow-up or fitting appointments for January or February before the holidays.

2. **Normalize the Experience**
   Send out email reminders or newsletters that acknowledge how common it is to “put off” hearing appointments in the winter—but gently remind patients of the risks of waiting too long.

3. **Offer a Winter Health Check Promotion**
   Not necessarily a discount, but a campaign that positions hearing care as part of staying healthy in winter — like flu shots or eye exams. “Start the year off right with a hearing health check” can go a long way.

4. **Partner With Other Health Providers**
   Team up with local primary care offices, pharmacies, or senior living centers to cross-promote winter wellness campaigns. Educating the public that hearing health *is* healthcare can increase motivation to act.

5. **Emphasize the Convenience of Modern Audiology**
   If available, highlight services like remote adjustments, home visits, or same-day fittings. Anything that reduces friction or makes coming in easier during winter can help.

While we may not fully solve the February slowdown, understanding it and planning for it should put us in a better position to ride out the quiet months and make the most of the rest of the year. This year, our clinic didn't do a good job at getting ahead of this slowdown, but with these strategies in mind, maybe, just maybe, we can make hearing health part of next year's resolutions.

Reference

- Canadian Institute for Health Information. (2020). *Seasonal Trends in Health Care Visits*. https://www.cihi.ca