

How facing up to her deafness has left Rula Lenska feeling years younger

By **Jill Foster**

Although you can't spot them underneath her famous flame-red hair, Rula Lenska wears hearing aids in both ears.

'I don't even know I've got them in,' she says. 'And I challenge anyone to be able to tell, even when I've got my hair up. People still think that you have to wear a huge contraption but, in fact, they can be colour-matched to your hair and are very discreet.'

'Let's face it, you associate hearing loss with getting old and boring. But who says you can't be sexy and wear hearing aids?'

The vivacious 63-year-old star, whose face – and husky voice – have been familiar features on British screens for more than 40 years, first started losing her hearing a decade ago. Rula, who is seen regularly on TV as Claudia Colby in *Coronation Street*, says: 'I wasn't really aware of it at first.'

'It may have been going for many years but it was only when I reached my mid-50s and people started making cruel comments that I had the television on too loudly or that I hadn't heard someone speaking to me, that I suspected something might be wrong.'

'Even so, I was too embarrassed to admit that I was losing my hearing. Instead, I started shying away from social situations where I could be accused of ignoring people when, in fact, I simply couldn't hear them.'

'With work, it was fine when I was on stage as actors enunciate well but I'd struggle to hear what people were saying when we were rehearsing in large, echoey halls.'

'It was only at a routine medical check-up that I have every three years that my doctor confirmed I had lost some hearing. Although I'd suspected it, I was alarmed and upset.'

Told that she had lost about 30 per cent of her higher-frequency hearing in her right ear and 20 per cent in the other – giving her a moderate hearing loss – she was referred to a specialist at the Royal National Throat, Nose and Ear Hospital in London, who performed tests including an MRI scan on her head, neck and shoulders to find the cause.

'None of my relatives had ever lost their hearing so there was no genetic link,' says Rula, who was born and raised in Cambridgeshire, the eldest daughter of exiled Polish aristocrats Major Count Ludwik Maria Lubieniski and Countess Elzbieta Tyszkiewicz. 'And I hadn't suffered from any head trauma or loud noise.'

'The only connection the doctors could make was that I'd suffered a couple of serious ear infections

Who said hearing aids mean you can't be sexy?



when I was younger after I'd been scuba-diving.

'When you dive near coral it can enter the ear and damage the cilia – the hairs in the inner ear – and this can cause loss of hearing. I'd treated the infections with strong antibiotics but they had taken a long time to heal and that may be why I've lost some hearing. But the doctors say

my loss of hearing is still a mystery.'

One in seven people in the UK have hearing problems, most commonly as a result of the ageing process. About 71 per cent of people over 70 and 41 per cent of people over 50 in the UK have some kind of impairment.

Audiologist Mark Edgar explains: 'Hearing loss happens to everyone as a natural part of ageing – we call this presbycusis. Basically, the cells that pick up sound within the ear wear out. But most patients I see who, like Rula, have moderate levels of high-tone loss are in their 70s.'

'In younger patients, hearing is more likely to be damaged due to trauma such as a blow to the head or infections, and swimming is a common cause. Deep-sea diving puts a great deal of pressure on the ear, and if any water penetrates the

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middle or inner ear, bacteria can build up, leading to disease.

'And the drugs we use to treat many common illnesses can cause deafness because they lead to excess production of natural fluids in the ear. Sometimes, hearing returns when the drug is withdrawn but in the case of drugs such as quinine, used to treat malaria, and some antibiotics, hearing loss is permanent.'

Rula was recommended to wear a hearing aid after visiting the specialist eight years ago. It was, she says, a revelation. 'I was astounded by the amount of noise I'd grown used to not hearing,' she admits. 'I realised I couldn't hear birdsong properly – I could hear some of it but not the full 3D version. Children and women with high-pitched voices were difficult to hear clearly and even intimate whispering could be a struggle. It's not great to have someone whisper "I love you" and then have to say, "Pardon me?"'

Besides being able to hear these things again, there are other benefits of wearing hearing aids. 'I'd always suffered from aches in my shoulders, neck and back,' says Rula. 'I realised that it was because I'd been hunched up and tense trying to listen in. Since I've been wearing them, I've had no problems at all like that.'

Mr Edgar says: 'In the past, hearing aids only helped with volume. But now they are very sophisticated. Some makes automatically alter if you go into loud or quiet areas – they can amplify specific frequencies, tailored to the patient's needs. And digital hearing aids are discreet – you wouldn't know a person was wearing one.'

Rula, who was married to TV tough guy Dennis Waterman for 11 years until their divorce in 1998, says: 'They are little miracles of technology and they are getting better and better.'

It is only in the past few months that the actress, who is on the judging panel for this year's Specsavers Sound Barrier Star Awards – set up to recognise achievements of people who are deaf or hard of hearing – has decided to come out about her condition.

'I'm so glad I admitted it,' she says. 'Now, I'd like to think that anyone who is worried about their hearing will have it tested and get help. It's free from your GP and it's much less scary than you realise.'

'I've been very reassured by the reaction when I tell people I'm hard of hearing. Most people just say, "So what?"'

● To nominate someone for The Specsavers Sound Barrier Star Award, download an entry form at www.specsavers.co.uk/hearing or visit a Specsavers hearing centre for an entry leaflet. Closing date for entries is July 1.

SOUND MOVE: Rula decided to confront her condition after years of being embarrassed by it. Left: With former husband Dennis Waterman

'It's not great when someone whispers I love you ... and you say: Pardon me?'



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