

Losing your hearing suddenly

We have lots of information
on deafness, hearing loss
and tinnitus.

Go to

www.rnid.org.uk

Contact our Information Line

Telephone 0808 808 0123

Textphone 0808 808 9000

Or write to us

informationline@rnid.org.uk

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London EC1Y 8SL

Fax 020 7296 8199

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Three facts

RNID • 

Changing the world for deaf
and hard of hearing people

Losing your hearing suddenly

This factsheet is part of RNID's **healthcare** range. It is written for people who have suddenly lost their hearing.

Read this factsheet to find out:

- How do we hear?
- What are the different types of hearing loss?
- What is sudden hearing loss?
- What do I do if I lose my hearing suddenly?
- What can cause sudden hearing loss?
- Can sudden hearing loss be accompanied by tinnitus?
- Can sudden hearing loss be accompanied by balance problems?
- How do I come to terms with a sudden hearing loss?
- What else can help?
- Where can I get further information?

At the end of this factsheet, we give you details of useful organisations you can contact for further information.

If you would like this factsheet on audio tape, in Braille or in large print, please contact our Information Line (see front page).

How do we hear?

The ears are your organs of hearing and balance. They have three sections:

- outer ear
- middle ear
- inner ear.

Soundwaves enter the outer ear (the pinna and external ear canal) and travel down the ear canal until they reach the eardrum. The sound makes our eardrum vibrate, and this passes the soundwaves into the middle ear. The middle ear is an air-filled space that links the outer ear with the inner ear.

Within the middle ear there is a chain of three tiny bones stretching from the eardrum to the cochlea (the hearing organ within the inner ear). It is these three bones that pick up the

vibrations of the eardrum and mechanically conduct the soundwaves through the middle ear to the cochlea.

The cochlea is a fluid-filled chamber that looks a bit like a snail shell. When the soundwaves enter the cochlea, the fluid moves and tiny sensory cells called hair cells pick up the movement and trigger an electrical signal in the auditory nerve. There are more than 15,000 hair cells in the cochlea and they get their name from tufts that stick out of the top. Different hair cells pick up different parts of the sound spectrum depending on where they are positioned in the cochlea. The auditory nerve then passes electrical signals to the brain, which recognises them as sounds.

What are the different types of hearing loss?

There are two main types – **conductive** or **sensorineural**. Some people have both conductive and sensorineural hearing loss, known as a **mixed** hearing loss.

Conductive hearing loss

Conductive hearing loss is due to a mechanical blockage or failure preventing sound vibrations from passing freely through the outer or middle ear. For example, sound will not be passed to the cochlea properly if the eardrum or middle ear bones are damaged, or if there is a build up of wax in the ear canal.

Sensorineural hearing loss

Sensorineural hearing loss is caused by damage to the hair cells in the cochlea. These cells cannot be repaired or replaced. Another cause of sensorineural hearing loss is damage to the auditory nerve, though this happens very rarely.

There are also different degrees of hearing loss, ranging from a mild hearing loss to a profound hearing loss.

What is sudden hearing loss?

A sudden hearing loss can be either a conductive hearing loss or a sensorineural hearing loss, depending on which parts of the ear are affected. It may affect one or both ears. It can happen instantly or (despite the word 'sudden') over the course of a few weeks. Your hearing may recover, but it also may not, and you may be left with a permanent hearing loss.

Recovery will depend on the cause and severity of the problem (see 'What can cause sudden hearing loss?' below). You must seek urgent help if you think you have a sudden hearing loss. Please see the next section for more detailed advice.

What do I do if I lose my hearing suddenly?

If you think you have a sudden hearing loss in one or both ears, see your GP. Unless the problem is just a blockage caused by a wax build-up, which can be removed in the GP's surgery, you should ask your GP for an urgent referral to an ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist. This is particularly important if your GP also discovers that you have a perforated eardrum, discharge from your ears or if you are feeling dizzy.

If you cannot see your GP and have a severe sudden hearing loss, you should go to your nearest hospital accident and emergency department (A&E). It is very likely that the hospital will have an ENT department. An ENT specialist should carry out detailed tests to assess the degree and type of hearing loss you may have. You may need to stay in hospital for appropriate treatment or you may be treated as an outpatient.

What can cause sudden hearing loss?

Causes can include:

- wax
- infections
- trauma
- ototoxic drugs
- acoustic neuromas
- Ménière's disease.

Wax

Wax can build up in your ear canal and cause a hearing loss. A normal amount of wax is perfectly healthy and helps keep your ears clean. However, some people produce more wax than others and it can build up in your ear canal. This may also happen if you use cotton buds, which can push the wax further into your ear where it cannot come out on its own. Although the wax may have been building up for quite some time, you can experience a quite sudden loss of hearing at the point when the wax blocks your ear canal completely. You should visit your GP who will be able to advise you of the best course of action. If you do have a build up of wax, you will probably need to have the wax removed. Once the wax is removed, your hearing should return to normal. You may also find our factsheet **Ear syringing** helpful.

Infections

You can get infections and inflammation in different parts of your ear, which will cause different symptoms. You may have an ear infection in your outer or middle ear. Infections that cause inflammation in the middle ear are reasonably common, especially in children. These can cause a hearing loss that is usually temporary. However, you can also get infections in your inner ear, such as labyrinthitis. Labyrinthitis usually only affects one ear. It may affect your hearing and can also make you feel dizzy and can cause tinnitus (see page 6). The symptoms of labyrinthitis are quite likely to go away as the infection gets better. Meningitis (especially the type caused by bacteria), measles or mumps can sometimes affect the inner ear and cause a sudden permanent hearing loss. In the case of mumps, this is usually on one side only. If you are pregnant and have rubella (German measles), then your baby may lose its hearing permanently. When children or adults get rubella, it doesn't usually affect their hearing.

If caught in time, most infections can be treated and hearing usually recovers. But in the case of meningitis, measles, mumps and rubella, permanent deafness is one of several serious effects that can sometimes follow. So it is important for children to be immunised against measles, mumps and rubella. Meningitis immunisation is sometimes made available to people at risk when there is a local outbreak.

Trauma

If you have a head injury, it can directly affect the inner ear or the structures in the middle ear and can cause a hearing loss. The extent of the problem depends on the seriousness of the head injury. In addition, loud blasts can cause damage to the middle ear structures, and can also damage the inner ear. Sudden large changes in air pressure can also affect your hearing, but this is quite rare. If you have any ear surgery, there may be risks to your hearing. You should discuss any risks with your doctor before the operation.

Hearing loss from trauma can be temporary or permanent, depending on the extent of the damage to your ear.

Ototoxic drugs

Ototoxic drugs are drugs that may cause damage to the inner ear, resulting in hearing loss. There may be a risk to your hearing when these drugs are given in very large doses or when very strong drugs need to be used – for example, to treat cancer. Ototoxic drugs can affect both ears and can cause mild-to-profound hearing loss. The hearing loss can be temporary or permanent, and will depend on the type of drug, the dosage and how the drug is taken. If your doctor prescribes ototoxic drugs, they should discuss with you how

they might affect your hearing. For more information, see our factsheet **Drugs and hearing loss**.

Acoustic neuromas

An acoustic neuroma is a rare benign growth – that is, it is **not** malignant or ‘cancerous’ – on the hearing and balance nerves that can affect hearing. It may even cause a sudden permanent sensorineural hearing loss, balance problems and tinnitus. If you need surgery to remove an acoustic neuroma, there is a high risk that you may lose your hearing completely on the affected side. For more information, see our factsheet **Acoustic neuroma**.

Ménière’s disease

If you have Ménière’s disease you will experience changing bouts of pressure in one ear with a low-tone sensorineural hearing loss, tinnitus and long bouts of dizziness. Your sudden hearing loss may improve in the short-term, but can recur with further bouts of Ménière’s disease. For more information, see our factsheet **Ménière’s disease**.

Can sudden hearing loss be accompanied by tinnitus?

Yes. Tinnitus is the word for noises that some people hear ‘in the ears’ or ‘in the head’, such as buzzing, ringing, whistling, hissing and other sounds. You should be able to receive advice and information about managing tinnitus from your audiology service, ENT specialist or tinnitus clinic. You can also contact the RNID Tinnitus Helpline for more information (see page 11).

Can sudden hearing loss be accompanied by balance problems?

Yes. Your GP or specialist will be able to discuss treatment and how to cope with balance problems. Our leaflet **Ears and ear health** and our factsheet **Dizziness and balance problems** can tell you more.

How do I come to terms with a sudden hearing loss?

Losing your hearing suddenly can be a traumatic experience, particularly if the loss is severe and you also have tinnitus or balance problems. Hearing loss can leave you with a very different experience of the world, which can be bewildering and frightening.

The previous section about causes of sudden hearing loss explains how in some cases your hearing may recover. But if it does not, you will need time to come to terms with the

changes. You will also need help from professionals, friends, family, work colleagues and perhaps groups of people who have gone through a similar experience.

How you feel about your hearing loss will change over time. If it is due to a sudden and temporary acute illness or injury, it may be a while before you feel the full impact of the loss.

Some common feelings about losing your hearing permanently

When you first lose your hearing, you might find it quite difficult to come to terms with the fact that the loss is permanent. This is a normal reaction to a sudden loss of any kind. You might find yourself thinking that it is impossible for your hearing to disappear as quickly as it has done and you may believe that it will come back. You might also think that medical science will be able to restore your hearing and find it difficult to accept that doctors can give you only a limited amount of help.

As you recover from the physical effects of the original illness or injury, you will probably return to the routines you had before you lost your hearing. You might be fitted with hearing aids and will start to develop skills to help you cope with your deafness. This will help you feel more in control again. However, this may also be the time when you experience the full emotional impact of your hearing loss and begin to realise that your hearing will not get better.

You might feel very angry towards yourself, doctors, or others who you may feel have somehow caused your hearing loss. You may also feel very isolated because other people cannot see your deafness, tinnitus or balance problem and may seem to be ignoring it. They may misunderstand your problem, or even think you do not have one at all.

What you and others can do to help

You might find that when you tell people you are deafened, they may seem awkward and embarrassed. However, if you are not open with people you may be left feeling even more isolated. You will be helping yourself and others if you describe your hearing loss to them and explain what you need them to do. Don't feel embarrassed if you don't hear someone properly. Remember, you do not need to keep apologising for your deafness. It is up to everyone in a conversation to communicate clearly.

With the right sort of professional support, and with time, you should find that you become more skilled at being aware of your environment, communicating and helping others to communicate well with you. As your skills grow, you will feel more in control and more like

your old self. You will probably find that you are able to adapt the way you do things so that you can continue to enjoy your leisure interests and social life.

At work, your employer has a duty under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) to make adjustments and provide equipment and support to help you work to your full potential. See our factsheet **Discrimination and employment – your rights under the DDA** and also the section 'Help if you are working or looking for work' on page 11.

Involving your family and friends

If your partner, relative or a close friend can go with you on your visits to your ENT specialist or audiologist, they can learn about ways they can make communication easier for you. If your family and close friends don't ask you about your deafness and treat you as they did before you lost your hearing, it does not mean they don't care. It is very common for people to react in this way. They may be bewildered by your deafness and think that the best way to help you is to treat you as if nothing has changed.

Our factsheet **Living with someone who has a gradual hearing loss** also applies in many ways to sudden deafness, as it has lots of tips to help your partner, relative or close friends understand what it means to have a hearing loss.

What else can help?

Hearing aids

If your hearing loss does not improve you may be offered hearing aids. National Health Service (NHS) hearing aids are free of charge and include batteries and any necessary repairs. You can also buy hearing aids privately. For more information, see our factsheets and leaflets:

- **Getting hearing aids**
- **Digital hearing aids**
- **The NHS hearing aid service**
- **Buying hearing aids?**

Cochlear implants

If your hearing loss is profound, affects both ears and you get no benefit from using hearing aids, you may be offered a cochlear implant. For more information, see our factsheet **Cochlear implants**.

Equipment

You can get a range of equipment to help you in your home, in the car, at work and when you are out socialising. For example, if you have difficulty hearing an alarm clock, telephone or doorbell ringing, you can get equipment that has been designed or adapted for deaf and hard of hearing people. Amplified telephones are also available or you may wish to try a textphone. You can also get equipment to help you listen to conversations, meetings or the television. For more information, see these RNID leaflets and factsheets:

- **Products to make life easier**
- **Listening equipment**
- **Text communications.**

Help if you are working or looking for work

If you have lost your hearing and are already working, or if you are looking for work, you can get a lot of support. For example, RNID's Employment, Training and Skills Service (ETSS) can support you into training and job placements as well as employment. Contact the RNID Information Line for details of your nearest office.

Lipreading classes

You may find that you get a great deal from joining a lipreading class. Qualified lipreading teachers will demonstrate the different shapes that sounds make on the lips so that you can identify them. They also explain how to fill in the gaps of speech that you can't hear, and how to use clues from the context of the conversation. Going to a lipreading class can boost your confidence and give you the chance to talk to other people who also have a hearing loss. You can find out more in our leaflet **Lipreading**.

Hearing dogs for deaf people

Some severely or profoundly deafened adults have benefited from owning a hearing dog. These specially trained dogs alert their owners to everyday sounds such as alarm clocks, doorbells, smoke alarms and telephones. The dogs also provide companionship and, for some people, a greater sense of security. If you are interested you will be carefully assessed and must show that you can commit yourself to looking after your dog. For more information about who can apply and how to apply, contact Hearing Dogs for Deaf People (see details on page 10).

Where can I get further information?

Association of Teachers of Lipreading to Adults (ATLA)

ATLA can give you a list of local lipreading classes. Send a stamped addressed envelope to:

Association of Teachers of Lipreading to Adults (ATLA), PO Box 506, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent ST2 9RE

Fax 0870 706 2916

ATLA@lipreading.org.uk www.lipreading.org.uk

British Tinnitus Association

The British Tinnitus Association campaigns for better services for people with tinnitus. It supports a network of local tinnitus groups around the country, has a range of publications and produces a quarterly magazine, *Quiet*.

British Tinnitus Association, Ground Floor, Unit 5, Acorn Business Park, Woodseats Close, Sheffield S8 0TB

Telephone 0800 018 0527 Fax 0114 258 2279

info@tinnitus.org.uk www.tinnitus.org.uk

deafPlus

deafPlus provides information, a range of training and personal support to deaf people.

deafPlus, Prospect Hall, 12 College Walk, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 6LE

Telephone 0121 415 2080 Textphone 0121 415 2080 Fax 0121 415 2081

Textphone answerphone 0121 415 2083

Videophone 0121 415 2082

info@deafPLUS.org www.deafplus.org

Hearing Concern

Hearing Concern provides advice, information and support to hard of hearing people.

Hearing Concern, 95 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8TX

Telephone 0845 0744600 Textphone 020 7440 9873 Fax 020 7440 9872

info@hearingconcern.org.uk www.hearingconcern.org.uk

Hearing Dogs for Deaf People

Hearing Dogs for Deaf People train dogs to alert severely or profoundly deaf people to specific sounds in the home, workplace or public buildings.

Hearing Dogs for Deaf People, The Grange, Wycombe Road, Saunderton HP27 9NS
Telephone 01844 348 100 Textphone 01844 348 100 Fax 01844 348 101
info@hearingdogs.org.uk www.hearingdogs.org.uk

Link Centre for Deafened People

The Link Centre provides a range of support services to deafened people, their families and the professionals who work with them.

The Link Centre for Deafened People, 19 Hartfield Road, Eastbourne BN21 2AR
Telephone 01323 638230 Textphone 01323 739998 Fax 01323 642968
info@linkdp.org www.linkdp.org

National Association of Deafened People (NADP)

The National Association of Deafened People (NADP) provides information and support for deafened people who have lost most or all of their hearing, and their families and friends.

National Association of Deafened People (NADP), PO Box 50, Amersham HP6 6XB
Telephone 01277 379538 Textphone 01227 762879 Fax 01277 379538
enquiries@nadp.org.uk www.nadp.org.uk

Further information from RNID

The RNID Information Line offers a wide range of information on many aspects of deafness and hearing loss. You can contact us for printed copies of this factsheet and the full range of RNID information factsheets and leaflets.

RNID Information Line

19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL
Telephone 0808 808 0123 Textphone 0808 808 9000 Fax 020 7296 8199
SMS 0780 0000 360 (supported by Lloyds TSB)
informationline@rnid.org.uk www.rnid.org.uk

If you want to find out more about tinnitus, you may find the factsheets in our **tinnitus** range useful. You may also wish to get our leaflet **Tune out tinnitus**.

Further information from the RNID Tinnitus Helpline

The RNID Tinnitus Helpline offers information and advice to people with tinnitus, their families and friends, and the professionals who work with them. You can contact us for further copies of this factsheet and the full range of our products for people with tinnitus. We also sell a book, *Understanding tinnitus – managing the noises in your ears or in your head*, and relaxation CDs, the Tune Out Tinnitus range.

RNID Tinnitus Helpline

19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL

Telephone 0808 808 6666 Textphone 0808 808 0007

Fax 020 7296 8199

SMS 0780 0000 360 (supported by Lloyds TSB)

tinnitushelpline@rnid.org.uk www.tuneouttinnitus.org.uk

Available Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm

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