

What Are Hearing Problems?

Hearing problems occur when a person has trouble noticing or understanding sounds. Problems can be caused by issues with the ear, the nerves that carry sound to the brain, or the part of the brain that makes sense of sounds. Sometimes the ear and brain don't work together the way they should, a condition called "auditory processing disorder." Hearing problems can happen in one or both ears, range from mild to severe, and be temporary or permanent.

Hearing loss is grouped by levels: mild, moderate, moderately severe, severe, or profound. "Hard of hearing" describes people with mild to severe hearing loss. People who are hard of hearing usually use spoken language and can benefit from hearing aids, cochlear implants, captions, and other tools. "Deaf" describes people with profound hearing loss, meaning they have little to no hearing. Many deaf people use sign language; some use cochlear implants.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

How common are hearing problems?

Hearing loss in children is more common than most people think. By age twelve, about 20% of children have some level of hearing loss.

What should I do if I suspect my child may have a hearing problem?

Talk to a medical provider. Children's hearing can be tested in different ways. All newborns get a hearing screening, and testing should be done during regular check-ups as they grow up.

What kind of help is there for hearing problems?

Common treatments include:

- **Ear tubes:** Tiny tubes are placed in the eardrum through minor surgery to help drain fluid, lower infection risk, and improve hearing.
- **Hearing aids:** These devices can make sounds louder and clearer, and are easy to place in and remove from the ear.
- **Cochlear implant:** This device is surgically placed to send sound signals straight to the hearing nerve.
- **FM system:** This wireless device uses its own radio frequency to send a speaker's voice – such as a teacher – directly to a child's receiver or hearing aids.
- **Sign language:** American Sign Language, or ASL, is a visual language used by many deaf and hard-of-hearing people in North America.

What other conditions are common in people with hearing problems?

Some people with hearing problems may have speech delays, language delays, trouble learning, vision problems, or genetic conditions. Be open with the medical provider about all symptoms.

Talking with a Medical Provider

When talking with medical providers or specialists, you might want to:

- **Bring notes:** Write down anything you've noticed, including concerns others have shared.
- **Push for answers:** Hearing loss and the terms that medical providers use can be confusing. If you don't understand, ask the provider to explain it another way.
- **Discuss:** Hearing tests aren't perfect. If your child passes hearing tests but issues continue, ask about potential audio processing issues, other tests, or if you should see a specialist.

What You Can Do at Home

Getting help can take time. While waiting for your appointment, you can:

- **Support learning at school:** Ask about accommodations like written directions and seating that is closer to the teacher.
- **Take listening breaks:** Taking short breaks every hour can help reduce listening fatigue.
- **Reach out:** The deaf and hard-of-hearing community is a strong source of support and information.

Learning about hearing problems and getting help is a journey. You're not alone.

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About This Series

This series of handouts on health conditions was written by clinicians in Weill Cornell Medicine's Pediatric Mental Health Integration Program, partners in the ACT for Youth CYSHCN Program Center of Excellence at Cornell University.

