

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

Hearing difficulty with normal/near normal hearing thresholds

Many people found to have normal/near normal hearing thresholds on pure tone audiometry testing, can follow a face-to-face conversation in a quiet room, but report having difficulty hearing a conversation in situations where there is background noise, or more than one person speaking. Environments such as open plan offices, call centres, hospitals, classrooms, factories, or even at home with the TV or radio on, can make it difficult to follow a conversation. In these cases, hearing aids are not appropriate but there are strategies you can use to try and help.

Why do I struggle to hear if I have normal/near normal hearing?

Below are factors which can affect our ability to hear and process speech.

Environmental factors

The acoustics of a room can affect the way sound waves travel, and therefore the way they are detected by the listener. High ceilings and bare surfaces reflect sound waves making it harder to hear, whereas lower ceilings and soft furnishings can absorb sound.

The use of screens in offices or speaking to someone in another room can make communication difficult, as visual clues such as lip reading are not possible. Walls and screens also affect the clarity of speech as they affect the transmission of high frequency sounds which are often the consonant sounds in speech (e.g., 'sh' 'f' 't'). These often start and end words, giving clarity and meaning.

Distractions such as other conversations, phone calls, phones ringing, printers, radios, footsteps, doors opening and closing and even typing on a keyboard can affect someone's ability to focus on and process conversation. Trying to hear above these sounds and distractions can be stressful for some people.

Effect of stress

Stress can affect our ability to focus and concentrate on conversation. When stressed, the brain finds it more difficult to process complex speech sounds. Having management strategies in place to address stress and anxiety can be helpful as when we are calm, we are much more likely to be able to process information.

People with busy lifestyles often find it difficult to relax at home when they feel there are other things they could be doing. Practising Tai Chi, yoga or Pilates can be useful in learning relaxation techniques away from other distractions.

Mindfulness is another technique which uses meditation to help people focus on and enjoy the moment, rather than worrying about the past or future problems which they may have no control over. Further support can be found here: <https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/>

Avoidance

When hearing becomes difficult in background noise, some people naturally try to avoid noisy situations. However, this can be unhelpful. Noisy situations also tend to be the more social occasions like parties, restaurants and family gatherings. Avoiding them can start to affect your quality of life. This avoidance can lead to further anxiety about struggling to hear in noise, but the more practice the auditory system gets at listening, the more we are able to pick out the correct information from the sounds around us. The more practice at listening we get, the better we get at picking things up correctly.

This demonstrates the importance of not withdrawing from difficult listening situations but rather to keep challenging our auditory system and hopefully strengthening its ability to cope, just like exercising a muscle.

Listening and attention

Our auditory systems naturally try to filter out important sounds from noise and help us decide what we need to pay attention to. There is a difference between hearing and listening.

Hearing is quite passive, we can hear the wind outside, fridge humming or clock ticking, it is involuntary and effortless and often sounds don't register unless something draws your attention to them.

Listening requires more active attention. Auditory processing is the system by which the brain decodes messages received via the auditory nerves to make sense of what it is we are listening to and deciding what importance to place on the sound.

Listening requires your attention, but we do have a limited capacity for this. When there is a lot of noise and activity going on around us it can result in our capacity for attention being overloaded with too many different stimuli. This can make holding a conversation difficult as we tend to hear the noise but are unable to make any sense of the speech. In a crowded room where you are paying attention to one person you tend not to be actively listening to other conversations around you, but you do have an unconscious awareness of them. If you heard your name mentioned, it would automatically refocus your attention to whoever has said it.

People often feel they have a hearing loss because of difficulty in certain listening situations. For example, if they are watching TV and their partner speaks to them, they do not always catch what is said. This is quite normal. If your attention is on one thing, by the time it has switched to something else, vital information will have been missed which would have made the speech make sense. This can easily be remedied by the person gaining your attention or turning down the TV before speaking.

Fatigue and illness can affect your ability to hear due to the effort and concentration required to pick out speech in noise.

Environment

Think about the place where you spend the most of your time. Is it especially quiet with little distraction? Or do you live alone or are not keen on having the TV or radio on in the background?

If you spend much of the day in a quiet place, then there is little to challenge the auditory system. If you then go out socially to noisy restaurants or pubs, then suddenly your ears have a lot more to cope with and filtering out unimportant sounds to focus on speech can be more difficult.

Many people feel that they used to be able to hear much better in those noisy situations and are confused as to why that has changed. Our capacity for filtering out irrelevant information does deteriorate over time, so even if your hearing levels remain within a normal/near normal range, it still may not be as good as when you were younger, as we lose some of our ability to filter out background noise as we get older.

Age seems to increase the amount of time needed for the brain to make sense of the sounds around us. Speech intelligibility is limited by our ability to focus on one thing and filter out competing conversations. This can mean in group situations, where there is more than one person talking, it is hard to focus on one conversation without being distracted.

Listening and communication techniques

Various listening techniques and communication tactics can help. Try to sit with your back to the wall so that you only hear sound from in front of you, or in a corner away from doors or distractions such as people walking past. Pick places with quieter background music playing and good lighting so you can clearly see the person who is speaking. Make people aware that you are struggling to hear. It makes a big difference if people are facing you when they are talking as visual clues are very important to help hearing. If people talk while looking down, from behind a newspaper, walking away or speaking to you from another room it will also increase the difficulty of listening so don't be afraid to ask people to change how they are communicating with you.

You also have to work at listening. People can fall into a habit of letting their friend or partner listen for them then just ask them later what was being talked about.

Why hearing aids won't help

There is sometimes a misconception that hearing aids can restore hearing back to 'normal' and some people may have unrealistic expectations about what hearing aids are capable of. The purpose of hearing aids is to amplify sounds for those who have a hearing loss; the amount of amplification prescribed depends on the level of hearing loss.

If hearing thresholds are within a normal/near normal range, no amplification is required and wearing a hearing aid could cause the ear to feel occluded or muffled. Hearing aids pick up and amplify surrounding sounds including background noise; they don't affect the way the brain processes the complex speech signals.

Be realistic

It is important to try to remember that everyone can struggle to hear in background noise, some people just seem to cope with this better than others.

Try to maintain realistic expectations about what you will be able to hear in difficult situations and try to implement listening strategies to help make the situation easier for you rather than just avoiding it altogether.

Useful resources

Hearing Success www.hearingsuccess.com

The Hearing Success website can provide support for anyone who struggles with their hearing, regardless of their level of hearing. Register for free resources to improve your confidence in understanding different speakers and listening in noisy environments.

SoundSuccess

An online functional listening program designed to reinforce the brain's ability to perceive and understand spoken language. It fosters the ability to listen to different speakers with increasing levels of complexity using structured, targeted listening exercises.

The Listening Room

An online resource that offers a library of interactive listening practise and activities. It fosters the ability to discriminate sounds and speech more easily using self-directed activities to practise listening to sounds, words and sentences.

WordSuccess

An app available for iOS and Android designed to improve word and phrase discrimination in quiet and noise. It fosters the ability to perceive and understand the difference between speech sounds using structured, targeted listening exercises.

Further sources of information

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/conditions

Our website: www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk

Patient Experience Team (PET)

PET is available to help with any of your compliments, concerns or complaints, and will ensure a prompt and efficient service.

King's Mill Hospital: 01623 672222

Newark Hospital: 01636 685692

Email: sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net

If you would like this information in an alternative format, for example large print or easy read, or if you need help with communicating with us, for example because you use British Sign Language, please let us know. You can call the Patient Experience Team on 01623 672222 or email sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net.

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