

Deafness and Hearing Loss

So what are we talking about “Deaf”?

Deaf is used as a general term to refer to people with a hearing loss. For most people it just means lack of capacity to hear. For people who use sign language it has a specific meaning – members of the Deaf community who share the same experiences.

How do you get a hearing loss?

There are many causes of hearing loss:

- At birth, there are genetic conditions which produce a hearing loss, or illnesses in pregnancy or even difficulties at birth which can cause the problem.
- After birth in early childhood, illnesses like measles and meningitis can cause hearing loss. Accidents can also be a problem and even emotional trauma.
- In adolescence and young adult life, accident is the most common cause although there are some hereditary conditions which produce hearing loss in teenagers.
- Adults from their twenties to fifties rarely develop hearing loss, although accidents and various illnesses or drugs can produce the problem.
- Over 50 years of age exposure to noise is a major factor and people often begin to have a hearing loss at that time.
- Typically most people have older relatives who are hard of hearing – their hearing loss seems to be a function of the general decline in functions. At least half of the population over 75 years has a significant hearing loss.

But we can fix this hearing loss – right?

For most cases, no actually. Often hearing aids, which amplify external sounds are a major help - especially with older people, or children who have milder hearing losses. Nowadays there are operations to replace the cochlea where there is an inner ear problem. There is some debate as to whether this is appropriate for all people.

So, milder hearing losses – what does that mean?

We are able to measure the amount of sound required to produce a hearing response in the person - a mild hearing loss means that the intensity of sound amplification needed is relatively low. Where the intensity needed to produce a sensation of sound is high, people are said to have a profound loss. With a profound loss, you are unlikely to be able to hear yourself talking.

What's special about hearing yourself?

Well if you do not hear your own voice you have difficulty in controlling it – it will sound flat and does not alter when there is noisy surroundings etc. If you do not hear your own voice as a child, then you will have great difficulty in learning to speak.

That's where sign language comes in – right?

Yes, Deaf children born with a profound hearing loss will be much more likely to use sign language and to mix with other Deaf people. They are likely to be members of the Deaf community.

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