Factsheet

Hearing problems

Although not a common symptom, hearing problems can sometimes be caused by multiple sclerosis (MS). But there are also other possible causes which are more common. If you develop hearing problems, you should contact your GP so that you can have the problem properly investigated.

MS-related hearing problems are usually a short-term symptom. For example, they might come on during a relapse, and they usually improve once the relapse is over. But some people do experience longer lasting changes to their hearing.

The kind of hearing problems that might be caused by MS include:

- Difficulty in hearing speech against a noisy background.
- Distorted sound.
- Increased sensitivity to noise.
- Tinnitus - the perception of noise in the ear or head. It can be a range of sounds but is usually a ringing or whistling noise.

Hearing problems might mean that you find it difficult to follow conversations or hear the television or radio, particularly in a crowded environment.

Very occasionally, people develop sudden hearing loss in one or both ears because of an MS relapse. If this happens, hearing will usually improve once the relapse is over, although some problems may remain.
Receptive aphasia

A very small number of people with MS have difficulties understanding spoken language. This is known as ‘receptive aphasia’, and it is a problem with language processing rather than hearing. The charity Speakability has more information and support for people affected by aphasia (see page 4).

What is happening in the brain?

MS-related hearing problems are usually caused by nerve damage in the 'brainstem', or other areas of your brain that are involved in processing information from the ear. The brainstem is the part of your brain that joins to the spinal cord, at the back of your head.

Vertigo

The brainstem is also involved in balancing the body. So if you have MS-related hearing problems you might also have problems with vertigo (a spinning sensation) and balance (a rocking ship sensation).

Diagnosis

If you have hearing problems, you should get your symptoms investigated. There are lots of tests to find the cause of hearing problems and the best ways to manage them.

These tests are usually carried out by an audiologist at the local hospital or health centre - ask your GP for a referral. Action on Hearing Loss has more information about hearing tests (see page 3).

Managing MS-related hearing problems

If your hearing problems are due to an MS relapse, you might be prescribed steroids. This might help to clear up symptoms more quickly. Your hearing could also improve or return to normal on its own after a relapse.

If your hearing difficulties are longer lasting, you might find a hearing aid for one or both ears helpful. Many different types of hearing aid are available, and an audiologist can advise you on which would be most suitable.

Other devices that can help with hearing difficulties include 'induction loops'. These are designed to work with a hearing aid. They make the sound you hear
More common causes of hearing problems

MS can cause hearing problems, but there are other possible causes which are more common.

Causes which might affect both ears include ageing and regular exposure to high levels of noise or music for long periods of time.

There are also common conditions that usually just affect one ear, and stop sound from getting through properly to the inner ear. These include a build-up of wax, damage to the eardrum (from poking something in your ear, for example) or inflammation or infection in the middle ear (just behind your eardrum). These conditions can usually be treated.

The charity Action on Hearing Loss has more information about possible causes of hearing loss.

Useful organisations

Action on Hearing Loss
Action on Hearing Loss is the new name for the RNID. They have information about hearing loss, and provide support for people affected by hearing loss.

Telephone 0808 808 0123 (freephone)
Textphone 0808 808 9000 (freephone)
Fax 020 7296 8199
SMS 07800 000 360
Email informationline@hearingloss.org.uk
www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk

British Tinnitus Association
Provides information and support for people with tinnitus, as well as raising awareness of the condition and how to prevent it.
Telephone 0800 018 0527
Email info@tinnitus.org.uk
www.tinnitus.org.uk
Hearing Link and Hearing Link Scotland
Helping deaf and hard of hearing people to combat the isolation of hearing loss, through support, advice and information.

England, Wales and Northern Ireland
Telephone/ textphone 0300 111 1113
SMS 07526 123 255
Email enquiries@hearinglink.org
www.hearinglink.org

Scotland
Telephone/ textphone 0131 447 9420
SMS 07564 916 798
Email scotland@hearinglink.org
www.hearinglink.org

Scottish Council on Deafness
The lead organisation for deaf issues in Scotland.
Telephone 0141 248 2474
Textphone 0141 248 2477
SMS 07925 417 338
Email admin@scod.org.uk
www.scod.org.uk

Speakability
Speakability is the national charity dedicated to supporting and empowering people with aphasia and their carers.

Information and helpline 0808 808 9572
Telephone 020 7261 9572
Email speakability@speakability.org.uk
www.speakability.org.uk

References
A list of references is available on request, and all cited articles are available to borrow from the MS Society library (there may be a small charge). Contact the UK Information Team, or visit www.mssociety.org.uk/library

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MS Helpline
The MS Helpline offers confidential emotional support and information to anyone affected by MS, including family, friends, carers, newly diagnosed or those who have lived with the condition for many years. Calls can be made in over 150 different languages, via an interpreter. Call freephone 0808 800 8000 (weekdays 9am-9pm, except bank holidays) or email helpline@mssociety.org.uk

Authors and contributors

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Suggestions for improvement in future editions are welcomed. Please send them to infoteam@mssociety.org.uk

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