Multiple sclerosis (MS) can cause hearing problems, but only rarely.¹

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. Some people do experience longer lasting changes to their hearing.

It can be difficult to know if a hearing problem is caused by MS. Many people who don't have MS have hearing problems,² particularly as they get older. If you develop problems, you should contact your GP to have your hearing checked for other possible causes as well.

The main hearing problems that people with MS report are:¹  
- 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 it is 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.³ ³ If this happens, hearing will usually improve once the relapse is over, although some problems may remain.²
What is happening in the brain?

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

Vertigo
The brainstem is also involved in balancing the body. Some people who have MS-related hearing problems may also have problems with vertigo (a spinning sensation) and balance (a rocking ship sensation).

More common causes of hearing problems

MS can cause hearing problems, but there are other possible causes which are more common. These include:
- aging, which can cause a gradual loss of hearing
- regular exposure to high levels of noise or music for long periods of time

These causes usually affect both ears.

There are also common conditions that stop sound from getting through properly to the inner ear, such as:
- a build-up of wax
- damage to the eardrum (from poking something in your ear, for example)
- inflammation or infection in the middle ear (just behind your eardrum)

These conditions can usually be treated.

The charity RNID has more information about possible causes of hearing loss (see page 4).

Diagnosis

If you have hearing problems, get your symptoms investigated. There are lots of tests to find the cause of hearing problems and the best ways to manage them. Tests are usually carried out at an audiology clinic or the local hospital or health centre - ask your GP for a referral.
Managing MS-related hearing problems

Some people who have hearing problems because of an MS relapse are prescribed steroids. This might help to clear up symptoms more quickly. Hearing can also improve or return to normal on its own after a relapse.²

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 clearer and reduce background sounds and echoes. Induction loops are usually fitted in public places such as offices or cinemas. You could install one in your own home. For more information on these and other devices, contact the RNID.

Useful organisations

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 Concern Link

Helping deaf and hard of hearing people to combat the isolation of hearing loss, through support, advice and information. Formerly known as Hearing Concern and LINK Centre for Deafened People.

Telephone 01323 638 230
Textphone 01323 739 998
SMS 07526 123 255
Email info@hearingconcernlink.org
www.hearingconcernlink.org

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RNID

RNID is the charity working to create a world where deafness or hearing loss do not limit or determine opportunity, and where people value their hearing.

Telephone 0808 808 0123 (freephone)
Textphone 0808 808 9000 (freephone)
Fax 020 7296 8199
SMS 07800 000 360

Email informationline@rnd.org.uk
www.rnid.org.uk

Scottish Council on Deafness

The lead organisation for deaf issues in Scotland.

Telephone 0141 248 2474
Textphone 0141 248 2477

Email admin@scod.org.uk
www.scod.org.uk

References


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Download from www.mssociety.org.uk/publications

If you don't have access to a printer and would like a printed version of this factsheet, or any other MS Society publication or DVD, call the Information Team on 020 8438 0799 (weekdays, 9am-4pm) or email infoteam@mssociety.org.uk

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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