Hearing loss

**Hearing loss is a common problem that often develops with age or is caused by repeated exposure to loud noises.**

[Action on Hearing Loss](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/) estimates that there are more than 10 million (about 1 in 6) people in the UK with some degree of hearing impairment or deafness.

Hearing loss can occur suddenly, but usually develops gradually. General signs of hearing loss can include:

* difficulty hearing other people clearly and misunderstanding what they say
* asking people to repeat themselves
* listening to music or watching television with the volume turned up higher than other people require

When to see your GP

See your GP if you're having problems with your hearing, or your child is showing signs of hearing difficulty. If you lose your hearing suddenly, in one or both ears, you must see your GP as soon as possible.

Your GP can check for any problems and may refer you to an audiologist (hearing specialist) or an ENT surgeon for further tests..

Why it happens

Hearing loss is the result of sound signals not reaching the brain. There are two main types of hearing loss, depending on where the problem lies:

* **sensorineural hearing loss –** caused by damage to the sensitive hair cells inside the inner ear or damage to the auditory nerve; this occurs naturally with age or as a result of injury
* **conductive hearing loss** – when sounds are unable to pass from your outer ear to your inner ear, often because of a blockage such as [earwax](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/earwax/Pages/Introduction.aspx?url=Pages/what-is-it.aspx), [glue ear](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Glue-ear/Pages/Introduction.aspx) or a build-up of fluid from an [ear infection](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/otitis-media/Pages/Introduction.aspx), or because of a [perforated ear drum](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Perforated-eardrum/Pages/Introduction.aspx) or disorder of the hearing bones

It's also possible to have both these types of hearing loss. This is known as mixed hearing loss.

Some people are born with hearing loss, but most cases develop as you get older.

Treating hearing loss

The way hearing loss is treated depends on the cause and how severe it is.

In cases of sensorineural hearing loss, there are several options that may help to improve a person’s ability to hear and communicate. These include:

* **digital hearing aids**– which are available through the NHS
* **bone anchored implants** – suitable for people who are unable to use hearing aids and for some levels of sensorineural hearing loss
* **middle ear implants** – suitable for some people who are unable to use hearing aids
* **cochlear implants** – for people who find hearing aids aren't powerful enough
* **lip reading and/or** [**sign language**](http://www.nhs.uk/CarersDirect/guide/communication/Pages/Signlanguage.aspx#sign)–such as British Sign Language (BSL)

Conductive hearing loss is sometimes temporary and can be treated with medication or minor surgery, if necessary. However, more major surgery may be required to fix the ear drum or hearing bones. If conventional hearing aids don't work, there are also some implantable devices for this type of hearing loss, such as a Bone Anchored Hearing Aids (BAHAs).

How hearing works

Sound waves enter your ear and cause your eardrum to vibrate. These vibrations are passed to the three small bones (ossicles) inside your middle ear.

The ossicles amplify the vibrations and pass them on to your inner ear where tiny hair cells inside the cochlea (the coiled, spiral tube inside the inner ear) move in response to the vibrations and send a signal through a nerve called the auditory nerve to the brain.