

# Introducing British Sign Language



**RNID** • 

for deaf and hard of hearing people



**BSL is the most widely used method of signed communication in the UK**

## **About this leaflet**

This leaflet tells you about:

- Learning British Sign Language (BSL).
- How deaf people communicate.
- The Deaf Community.
- Sign language in different countries.
- Regional variations in BSL.

We have also included BSL signs that are useful in everyday life, especially at work.

## **Learning British Sign Language**

It is impossible to learn to sign from a leaflet, a book, video or CD-ROM but we hope the signs in the leaflet will introduce you to BSL. If you find this leaflet interesting and would like to learn BSL the best way to start is to take a course taught by a qualified sign language teacher.

Contact the RNID Information Line for details of colleges running BSL courses in your area. We can also tell you more about RNID's guide to BSL – *Start to sign*. It is available as a CD-ROM or book and uses videoclips and photos to show hundreds of signs.

If you want to find out more about training to become a sign language interpreter see RNID's factsheet *Training as a BSL/English interpreter*.

## British Sign Language today

Deaf people in the UK use various methods of communication but BSL is the most widely used method of signed communication.

Some people use Sign Supported English (SSE). SSE is not a language in its own right, but more a kind of English with signs. Many people you see signing may be using SSE.

## The Deaf Community

It is estimated that 9 million people in the UK are deaf or hard of hearing. However, not all of them are members of the Deaf Community – people who use BSL as their first or preferred language. It is difficult to say how many people in the UK use BSL as their first or preferred language – current estimates suggest 50,000.

Many deaf people whose first or preferred language is BSL, may describe themselves as 'Deaf', with a capital 'D', to emphasise their Deaf identity. They may consider themselves part of the Deaf Community.



**An estimated  
50,000 people  
use BSL as  
their first or  
preferred  
language**

## **British Sign Language grammar**

BSL evolved naturally as all languages do. It uses both manual and non-manual components – handshapes and movements, facial expression, and shoulder movement. BSL is structured in a completely different way to English and like any language it has its own grammar. Linguists generally agree that BSL is a topic-comment language. For example, the question in English ‘What is your name?’ becomes the sequence ‘Your name what?’ in BSL.

## **Fingerspelling**

People who use BSL also use fingerspelling. Certain words – usually names of people and places – are spelled out on fingers. However, it is important to remember that fingerspelling alone is not sign language.

Contact the RNID Information Line for one of our A5 cards – *Standard Manual Alphabet*, *Welsh Manual Alphabet*, *Irish Manual Alphabet* and *Deafblind Alphabet*.

## Different languages in different countries

Sign languages are as diverse as spoken languages. Deaf people in different countries do not use the same sign language, but some sign languages have a similar structure. BSL is not universal – it is only used in the UK.

Some Deaf people in Northern Ireland prefer to use Irish Sign Language (ISL) as well as BSL.

## Regional variations

BSL has many regional variations in the same way that spoken languages have different dialects. In different parts of the country signs will have different meanings, or there will be different signs for the same words. For example there are 10 to 12 variations for the word 'holiday'.



**Sign languages are as diverse as spoken languages**



**Contact  
the RNID  
Information  
Line for  
details of  
colleges  
running BSL  
courses in  
your area**

## **Want to know more**

If you would like to buy books, videos or CD-ROMs about BSL, or you want to broaden your knowledge of deafness and the Deaf Community, contact the following organisations.

### **Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP)**

CACDP sells course materials and videos for all BSL examinations.

CACDP, Durham University Science Park, Block 4, Stockton Road, Durham DH1 3UZ.

Tel: 0191 383 1155. Textphone: 0191 383 7915.

Fax: 0191 383 7914.

E-mail: [durham@cacdp.org.uk](mailto:durham@cacdp.org.uk)

Website: [www.cacdp.org.uk](http://www.cacdp.org.uk)

### **Forest Bookshop**

Forest Bookshop supplies a wide range of books, videos and CD-ROMs on deafness.

Forest Bookshop Warehouse, Unit 2, New Building, Ellwood Road, Milkwall, Coleford, Gloucestershire GL16 7LE.

Tel: 01594 833858. Textphone: 01594 833507.

Videophone: 01594 810637.

Fax: 01594 833446.

E-mail: [forest@forestbooks.com](mailto:forest@forestbooks.com)

Website: [www.forestbooks.com](http://www.forestbooks.com)

## **RNID Information Line**

The RNID Information Line offers a wide range of information on many aspects of deafness and hearing loss.

RNID Information Line, 19-23 Featherstone Street,  
London EC1Y 8SL.

Tel: 0808 808 0123. Textphone: 0808 808 9000.

Fax: 020 7296 8199.

E-mail: [informationline@rnid.org.uk](mailto:informationline@rnid.org.uk)

Website: [www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)

## **RNID Library**

The RNID Library has specialist publications ranging from academic journals to books for children.

RNID Library, Royal National Throat, Nose and Ear  
Hospital, 330-332 Gray's Inn Road,  
London WC1X 8EE.

Tel: 020 7915 1553. Textphone: 020 7915 1553.

Fax: 020 7915 1443.

E-mail: [rnidlib@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:rnidlib@ucl.ac.uk)

Website: [www.ucl.ac.uk/Library](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Library)

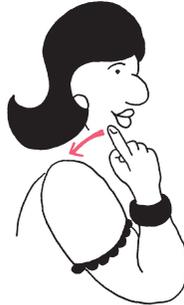
## **The RNID website**

**[www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)** has over 100 full colour video clip signs. They introduce you to a cross-section of basic BSL vocabulary – from greetings and introductions to talking about yourself and what you do.

# Time



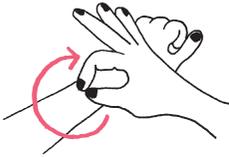
Time



Yesterday



Day



Hour



Today



Month



One week



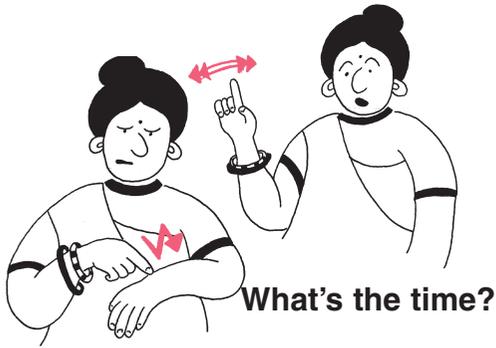
Year



Two weeks



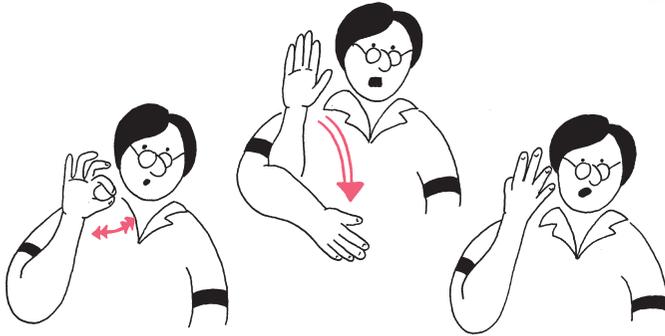
Tomorrow



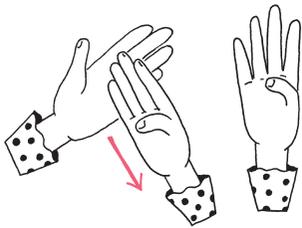
What's the time?



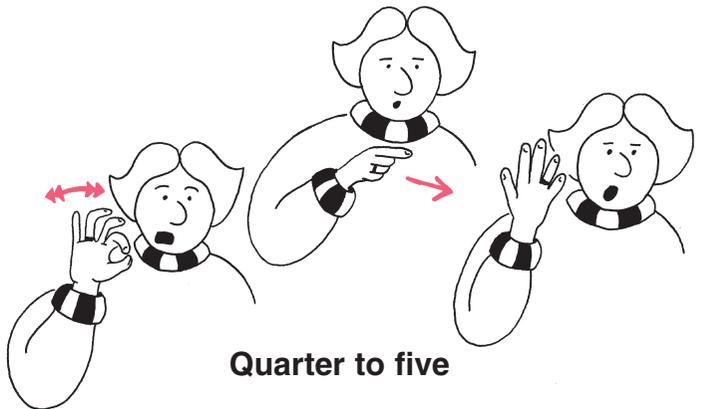
Four  
o'clock



Quarter past four



Half past four

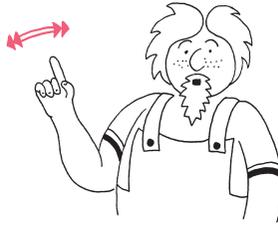


Quarter to five

# Questions



**Who?**



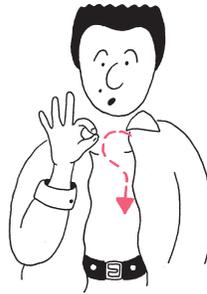
**What?**



**How?**



**Because/Why?**



**Question**



**When?**



**How many?**



**Where?**



**How much?**

# Want to know more?

This leaflet is available in audio tape, braille and large print.

We can also send you more information on many of the subjects covered in this leaflet. Just tick the boxes below, tell us what you particularly need to know about, or see our website at [www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)



## ***Please send me:***

*Introducing British Sign Language*

- Audio tape     Braille     Large print
- The RNID Publications Catalogue.
- Information about RNID Typetalk and BT TextDirect.
- Details of RNID communication services in my area.
- A copy of the RNID Sound Advantage *Solutions* catalogue, giving details of equipment for deaf and hard of hearing people.
- RNID's fundraising leaflet. RNID relies heavily on donations from individuals, companies, trusts and fundraising events. Our leaflet shows how *you* can help.
- Details on supporting RNID's future work with a legacy.

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## **Order form for *Start to sign*:**

<b>I would like to order:</b>	<b>Price</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>Start to sign</i> CD-ROM	£19.99	_____	_____
<i>Start to sign</i> book	£12.99	_____	_____
<i>Start to sign</i> CD-ROM and book together	£29.99	_____	_____
10% membership discount			_____
I enclose a cheque for			£ _____

*Please fill in your name and address details overleaf.*

**Please send this information to:**

(PLEASE WRITE CLEARLY, USING BLOCK CAPITALS)

Title (Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss) \_\_\_\_\_ First name \_\_\_\_\_

Surname \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Postcode \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ Textphone \_\_\_\_\_

Your contact details will be held on our database so that occasionally we can send you information on our work. Please tick this box if you do not wish your details to be kept on our database.

We will use any information you give below to help us tailor our services to your needs. You do not have to give this information, but if you do, please tick this box to confirm we may keep it on our database.

***Tick all boxes that apply***

**Is the information:**

- For you
- For a friend or family member
- A professional enquiry

**Are you?**

- At school or below school age
- A student       Working age
- Retired

**How would you describe yourself?**

- Profoundly/severely deaf
- Hard of hearing
- Hearing
- Hearing aid user
- I have tinnitus
- I have balance problems

**If we could provide it, would you like to receive information in a different format? Please use number 1, 2 or 3 to show your preferred choice:**

- Videotape in British Sign Language (BSL) and with subtitles
- E-mail/website
- Face-to-face

**If we could provide it, would you like information in another language?**

Yes. Please tell us which one \_\_\_\_\_

**Please return to: RNID Information Line, 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL or order from our website at [www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)**

# Become a member

The information and advice that you have received in this leaflet does not stop here. Joining the other 32,000 RNID members is an excellent way of receiving up-to-date information on deafness, hearing loss and tinnitus as well as our influential campaigns. All members benefit from:

- **One in Seven**, our lively, colour, bi-monthly magazine.
- **10% off** RNID priced publications.
- **A £5 voucher** towards equipment from RNID Sound Advantage.
- Access to **RNID Select** – special offers on a range of well-known brands.
- Being part of the **campaign** to improve the lives of deaf and hard of hearing people.

## How to join

Membership is open to all and costs as little as £12.50 a year. To join:

- **Visit [www.rnid.org.uk/join](http://www.rnid.org.uk/join)** or
- **Call 020 7296 8049 (tel/textphone)** or
- **Complete the coupon overleaf.**

You can save £2 off the standard price of membership by paying by Direct Debit. Contact the Membership Helpline on tel/textphone 020 7296 8049 for information.

## Join today!

Registered Charity No. 207720



## Yes, I want to stay informed by becoming a member!

Title (Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss) \_\_\_\_\_ First name \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE USE BLOCK CAPITALS)

Surname \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Postcode \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ Textphone \_\_\_\_\_

**Please accept my payment:** (*tick relevant boxes*)

**£19.50 Standard rate**

**£12.50 If you are retired, unwaged or a full-time student**

**I would like to make a donation of £ \_\_\_\_\_**

**I enclose a cheque/PO made payable to RNID** (*delete as appropriate*)

**I prefer to pay by MasterCard/Visa/CharityCard/Switch/Delta**  
(*delete as appropriate*)

Card number

Switch issue no

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Expiry date \_\_\_\_\_

Please treat all my membership payments and/or donations from 6 April 2000 until further notice as Gift Aid. (This will increase the value of your membership fee to RNID by almost a third, with no extra cost to you.)

*NB To qualify for Gift Aid, I understand that I must have paid an amount of Income Tax or Capital Gains Tax equal to the tax RNID reclaims on my donations and/or membership payments.*

Please return this form to RNID, FREEPOST LON13186, London EC1B 1AL

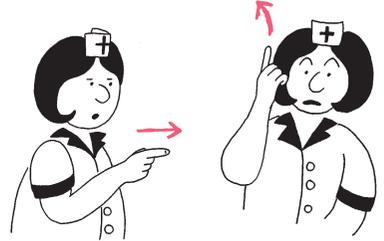
Occasionally RNID will send you information on our work, please tick this box if you would prefer not to receive this.  Occasionally we will allow other organisations to contact you, please tick this box if you would prefer not to be contacted.



Which?



How are you?



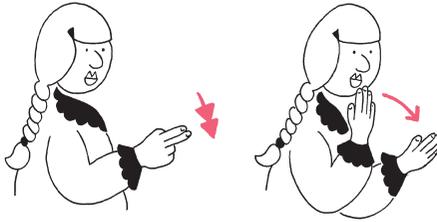
Do you understand?



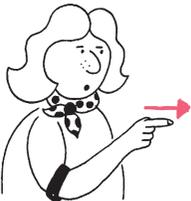
Sorry, I don't understand



How old?



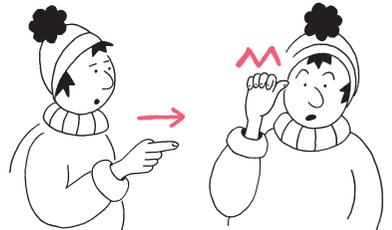
Again, please



Do you want?



Do you know?



# Health and safety



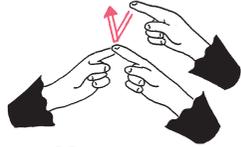
Health and safety



Fire drill



Doctor



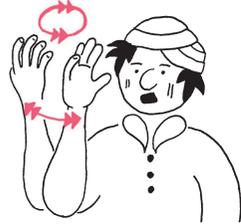
Urgent/  
Emergency



Unwell



Stop



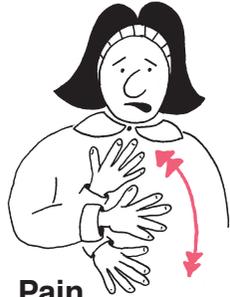
Ambulance



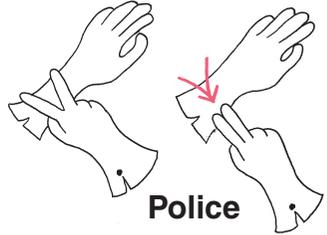
Dangerous



Hospital



Pain

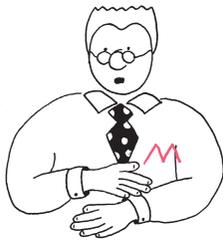


Police

# At work



Paper



Work



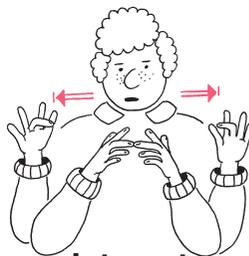
Textphone



Telephone



Telephone me



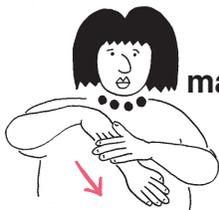
Internet



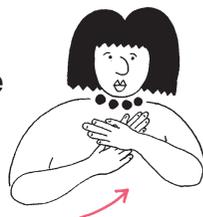
E-mail



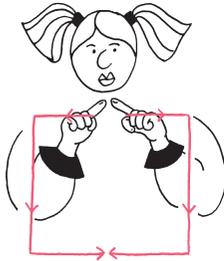
Disk



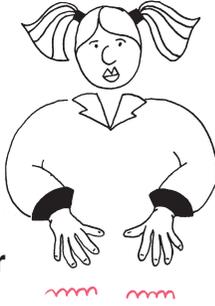
Fax machine



Fax it to me



**Computer**



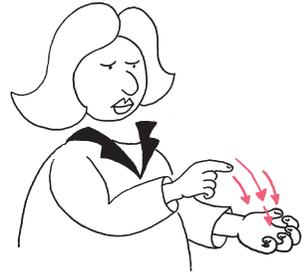
**Printer**



**Photocopier**



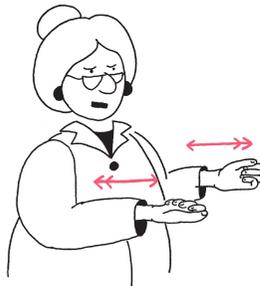
**Meeting**



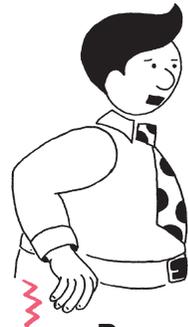
**Calculator**



**Union**



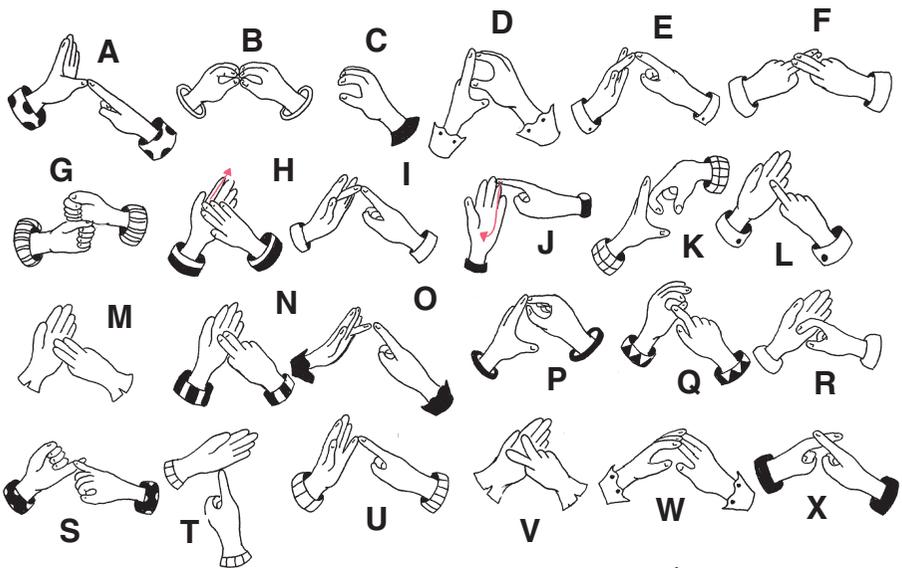
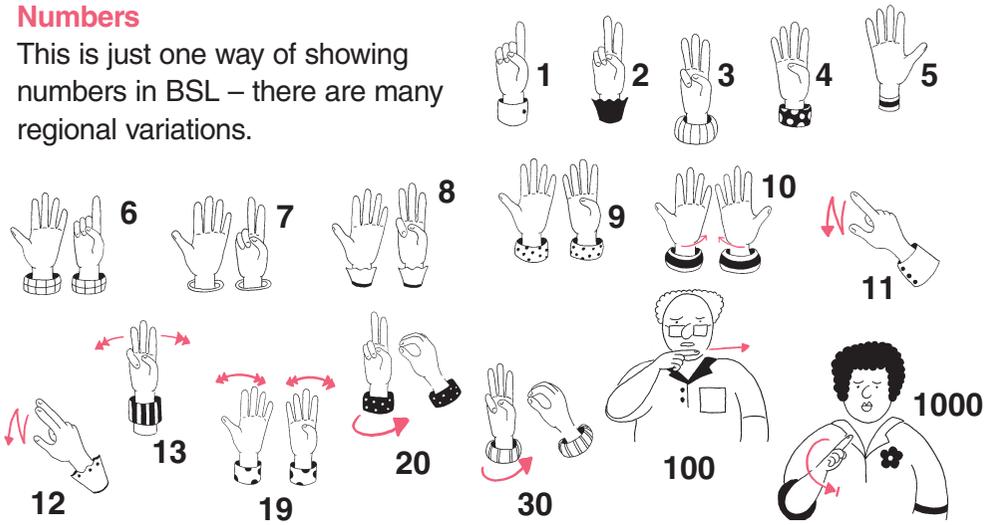
**Manager**



**Pager**

## Numbers

This is just one way of showing numbers in BSL – there are many regional variations.

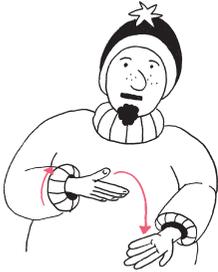


## Fingerspelling

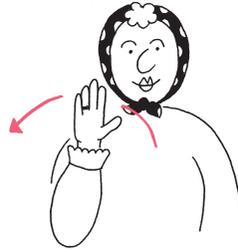
You can use fingerspelling – also called the Standard Manual Alphabet – to spell out words on your fingers.



# Extras



Extras



Hello



Goodbye



I know



Maybe



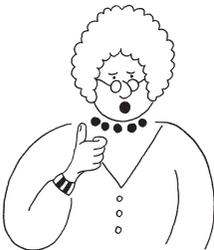
Name



Bad



Address



Good



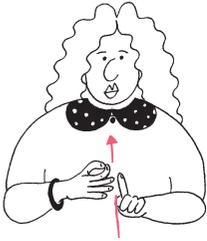
Morning



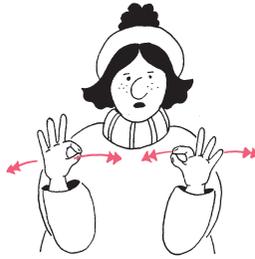
Afternoon



Night



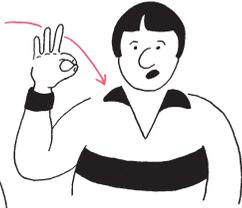
**Improve**



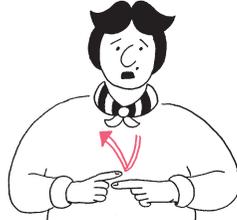
**Nothing**



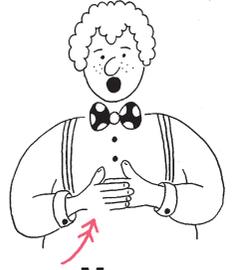
**I don't know**



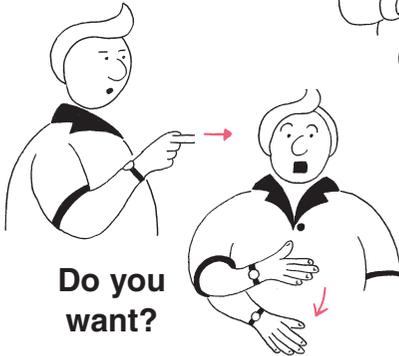
**Ask**



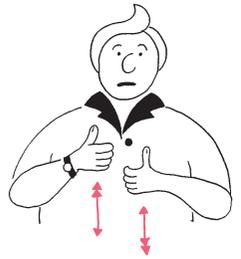
**Quickly**



**More**



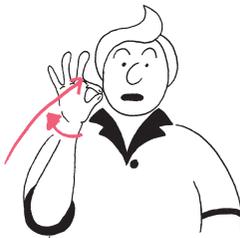
**Do you want?**



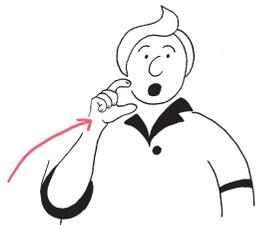
**Milk**



**Sugar**



**A cup of tea**



**A cup of coffee**



**Explain  
(to someone else)**



**Explain to me**



**Lunch**



**Holiday**



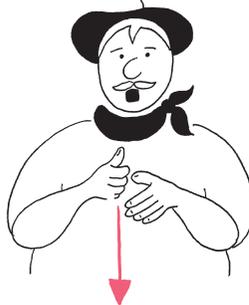
**Please**



**Thank you**



**Christmas**



**Start**



**Easter**



**Finish**

## What is RNID?

**RNID is the largest charity representing the 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK. As a membership charity, we aim to achieve a radically better quality of life for deaf and hard of hearing people. We do this in the following ways:**

- Campaigning and lobbying to change laws and government policies.
- Providing information and raising awareness of deafness, hearing loss and tinnitus.
- Training courses and consultancy on deafness and disability.
- Communication services including sign language interpreters.
- Training of interpreters, lipspeakers and speech-to-text operators.
- Seeking lasting change in education for deaf children and young people.
- Employment programmes to help deaf people into work.
- Care services for deaf and hard of hearing people with additional needs.
- RNID Tynetalk, the national telephone relay service for deaf and hard of hearing people.
- Equipment and products for deaf and hard of hearing people.
- Social, medical and technical research.

Published in June 2003.

This leaflet is part of RNID's **communication** range.

**In 2002, the Plain English Campaign awarded RNID  
a Plain English Award for our series of information leaflets.**

*Cover photograph by Crispin Hughes*

*Some photographs in this leaflet were posed by models.*

19-23 Featherstone Street  
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Fax 020 7296 8199

informationline@rnid.org.uk

www.rnid.org.uk

0131 inf008.0603 Registered Charity No. 207720  
Photography Elaine Duigenan, Chris Kelly



for deaf and hard of hearing people