

Deaf and hard of hearing people



RNID ● 

for deaf and hard of hearing people

About this leaflet

This leaflet will tell you more about deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK today. There could be lots of reasons why you want to know more about deaf and hard of hearing people. Maybe your colleagues are deaf. A member of your family, your friend or partner may be hard of hearing. Perhaps you teach deaf students. You may have deaf or hard of hearing clients or customers. Whatever your reason, this leaflet gives a brief introduction to deaf and hard of hearing issues. It looks at:

- How deafness is described and measured.
- What causes deafness.
- Hearing aids.
- Communicating with deaf and hard of hearing people and communication services.
- Equipment for deaf and hard of hearing people.
- The Disability Discrimination Act (1995).

RNID has factsheets and leaflets on most of the subjects covered in this leaflet. Contact the RNID Information Line at the address below.

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

Website: www.rnid.org.uk

Describing deafness

It is important to realise that being deaf or hard of hearing can mean very different things to different people. Some people will feel more comfortable with particular words to describe their own deafness. They might feel quite strongly about terms they do not like being used. RNID uses the following terms:

- **Deaf people.** We use the term deaf people in a general way when we are talking about people with all degrees of deafness.
- **Hard of hearing people.** We use this term to describe people with a mild to severe hearing loss. We quite often use it to describe people who have lost their hearing gradually.
- **Deafened people.** People who were born hearing and became severely or profoundly deaf after learning to speak are often described as deafened.
- **Deafblind people.** Many deafblind people have some hearing and vision. Others will be totally deaf and totally blind.
- **The Deaf Community.** Many Deaf people whose first or preferred language is British Sign Language (BSL) consider themselves part of the Deaf Community. They may describe themselves as 'Deaf', with a capital D, to emphasise their Deaf identity.



Being deaf or hard of hearing can mean very different things to different people

Some facts and figures

- There are an estimated 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK. The number is rising as the number of people over 60 increases.
- In the UK, there are about 20,000 children aged 0-15 years who are moderately to profoundly deaf. Many more have temporary hearing problems in early childhood.
- There are an estimated 123,000 deafened people in the UK aged 16 and over.
- There are about 23,000 deafblind people in the UK.
- It is difficult to say how many people in the UK use BSL as their first or preferred language – current estimates vary between 50,000 and 70,000.
- Most of the 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK have developed a hearing loss as they got older. Only about 2% of young adults are deaf or hard of hearing. Around the age of 50 the proportion of deaf people begins to increase sharply and 55% of people over 60 are deaf or hard of hearing.

How is deafness measured?

Deafness and hearing loss are usually measured in units called dBHL – dB stands for ‘decibels’ and HL stands for ‘hearing level’. A hearing test finds the softest sounds a person can hear – their thresholds – across a range of frequencies (itches of sounds). The greater the threshold level – in dBHL – the greater the hearing loss.

- Anyone with thresholds between 0 and 20 dBHL across all the frequencies is considered to have ‘normal’ hearing.
- People with mild deafness have some difficulty following speech, mainly in noisy situations. The quietest sounds they can hear in their better ear fall between 25 and 39 decibels.
- People with moderate deafness have difficulty following speech without a hearing aid. The quietest sounds they can hear in their better ear fall between 40 and 69 decibels.
- People with severe deafness rely a lot on lipreading, even with a hearing aid. BSL may be their first or preferred language. The quietest sounds they can hear in their better ear fall between 70 and 94 decibels.



Deafness and hearing loss are usually measured by finding the quietest sounds someone can hear



Hearing loss associated with ageing is known as presbycusis

- People who are profoundly deaf may communicate by lipreading and/or BSL. BSL may be their first or preferred language. The quietest sounds they can hear in their better ear average 95 decibels or more.

There are two main types of deafness.

Conductive deafness – where sound cannot pass through the outer or middle ear.

Sensorineural deafness – where the cause of deafness is in the cochlea or hearing nerve.

A hearing test will identify what type of deafness a person has.

What causes deafness?

There are many reasons why some people are born deaf or hard of hearing or lose their hearing later in life. Sometimes people may lose their hearing temporarily and it comes back when they receive medical treatment. For others deafness and hearing loss are permanent.

Below are just some of the causes of deafness and hearing loss:

- Some people lose their hearing as they grow older. This is known as presbycusis. It is the commonest type of deafness.
- A disease such as mumps or meningitis.
- Certain drugs, in particular aspirin in high doses, or antibiotics called aminoglycosides.
- Exposure to loud noise.
- A serious head injury.
- If a mother has rubella (German measles) while she is pregnant her baby may be born deaf.
- If a baby is born prematurely or the mother has a difficult labour.
- Medical conditions such as Menière's disease and otosclerosis.
- Glue ear.



**In the UK you
can get a
hearing aid
free of charge
from the NHS**

Hearing aids

About two million people in the UK have hearing aids, but only 1.4 million use them regularly. There are at least another three million people who do not have hearing aids but experience significant hearing difficulties in everyday life. They would be likely to benefit from hearing aids.

Hearing aids make sounds louder so that users are able to hear them. They are battery-operated and are usually worn in or around the ear. In the UK you can get hearing aids free of charge on the NHS. Some people choose to buy them privately.

Hearing aids are described as analogue or digital, depending on the technology they use to process sound. Digital hearing aids use technology that can process sounds better than analogue hearing aids.

Until recently you couldn't get a digital hearing aid on the NHS. However, NHS hearing aid services are being modernised across the UK and digital hearing aids are now available in more and more areas. All services in England should be providing them by April 2005. In Wales, all audiology services are now delivering digital hearing aids. There is limited provision in Scotland and Northern Ireland. We hope that eventually funding will be made available to provide digital hearing aids on the NHS throughout the UK.

Communicating with deaf people

Deaf and hard of hearing people choose to communicate in different ways depending on their level of deafness:

- Some people with a mild hearing loss might use a hearing aid or find lipreading helpful.
- People with moderate hearing loss will have difficulty hearing what is said without a hearing aid, particularly somewhere noisy.
- People who are severely deaf may have difficulty following what is being said even with a hearing aid. Many lipread and some use sign language or speech-to-text.
- Some, but not all, people who are profoundly deaf may find that hearing aids are of little benefit to them. They may use sign language, speech-to-text or lipread.

Lipreading

Everyone lipreads to some extent, especially in noisy situations. When you speak to someone their facial movements will give you information to help you understand the meaning of what they are saying. The biggest group of lipreaders is hard of hearing people.



If someone is lipreading you, face the light, or your face will be in shadow

If you are talking to someone who relies on lipreading, remember that it requires a lot of skill and concentration and can sometimes be tiring. Many words look similar on the lips. Some sounds are pronounced at the back of the throat and have no visible shape on the lips.

Making it easier for someone to lipread you

- Find a suitable environment with good lighting, away from noise and distractions.
- Sit or stand at the same level as the lipreader, and three to six feet away (one to two metres).
- Face the light, or your face will be in shadow.
- Make sure the lipreader is looking at you before you speak.
- Introduce the topic of conversation.
- Speak clearly at a moderate pace without raising your voice or over-emphasising your speech.
- Use natural facial expressions, gestures and body language.
- Keep your face visible. Do not put your hands near it or wear sunglasses – and do not turn away while you are talking.
- Use plain English and repeat or rephrase something if the lipreader finds it difficult to follow.
- Check that the lipreader can follow you.
- Be patient and take time to communicate.

Want to know more?

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

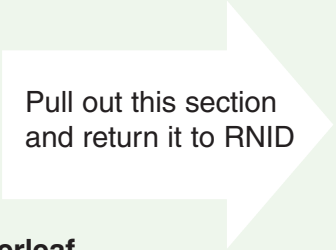
We can also send you more information on many of the subjects covered in this leaflet. Just tick the boxes below, tell us what you particularly need to know about, or see our website at www.rnid.org.uk



Please send me:

Deaf and hard of hearing people

- 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.
- Information on how to take part in RNID campaigns.
- Other information – please tell us what you would like to know.



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

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 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.

British Sign Language

British Sign Language (BSL) is the most widely used method of signed communication in the UK. 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.

BSL developed naturally as 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.

People who use BSL also use fingerspelling. Certain words – usually names of people and places – are spelled out on fingers. Fingerspelling alone is not sign language but it can be very useful when communicating with deaf signers. Contact the RNID Information Line for one of our A5 cards – Standard Manual Alphabet, Welsh Manual Alphabet and Irish Manual Alphabet.

If you would like to learn BSL contact the RNID Information Line for more information about classes in your area.



**Deafblind
people
communicate
using a variety
of methods**

Communicating with deafblind people

Deafblind people communicate using a variety of methods, depending on their own needs.

- As many deafblind people still have a little sight and hearing they can use speech and hearing aids to communicate.
- Deafblind people who were born deaf or became deaf in early years usually communicate using BSL. If they have lost their sight they will use hands-on signing.
- Some deafblind people use the Block Alphabet. This involves tracing out the alphabet in capital letters on the palms of their hands, or other part of the body.
- A quicker method is the Deafblind Manual Alphabet, where words are spelt out on the fingers and hands of a deafblind person.
- Very rarely, some deafblind people use Tadoma, where they place their hands on the speaker's lips or throat to feel vibrations.

Contact the RNID Information Line for a free Deafblind Manual Alphabet card.

Communication services

There are lots of different communication services available to help hearing and deaf people communicate with each other. You should always ask people what sort of service they would like before booking one. To find out more about any of these services contact the RNID Information Line.

A BSL/English interpreter interprets from one language to the other. In the UK this will usually be from British Sign Language (BSL) to spoken or written English, or spoken or written English to BSL.

Lipspeakers repeat what a hearing person or speaker is saying, without using their voice, so that deaf and hard of hearing people can lipread them.

Speech-to-text reporters (also known as palantypists or stenographers) type every word that is spoken using a special keyboard. Everything that is said appears on a computer screen.

Electronic notetakers (or **SpeedText® operators**) type a summary of what has been said. This appears on a computer screen for the deaf person to read.



A BSL/English interpreter interprets from one language to another

Notetakers are trained to take accurate and clear notes for deaf or hard of hearing people. They do this in handwritten English or on a computer.

Communication support workers can offer support in various ways including taking notes, BSL/English interpreting or lipspeaking.

Deafblind interpreters or **communicator guides** help hearing and deafblind people communicate with each other.

Equipment for deaf and hard of hearing people

There is a range of equipment available for deaf and hard of hearing people to use in the home, car, workplace and when out socialising. They will need different sorts of equipment depending on their level of deafness or hearing loss.

Equipment to alert people to different sounds

Household equipment often makes a sound to get your attention. Someone who has difficulty hearing, for example an alarm clock, telephone ringing, doorbell, baby crying or smoke alarm, can get equipment designed for deaf and hard of hearing people. This equipment uses flashing lights, pagers or vibrating pads to alert them to sounds.

Telephones

People who have difficulty hearing the phone ringing can add an extension bell or a flashing light to the phone. A telephone amplifier may also help them hear what a caller is saying to them.

Some phones also have an inductive coupler built into the handset. This enables people who use hearing aids with a 'T' setting to use the phone.

Textphones (often known as Minicoms)

People who are severely or profoundly deaf may use a textphone. Textphones have a display screen and a keyboard so you can type what you want to say and read what is being typed in reply.

RNID Typetalk

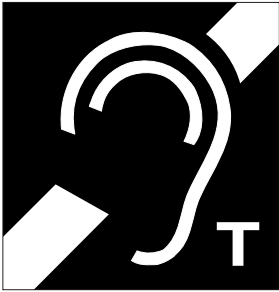
If you have a textphone and wish to contact someone else with a textphone you can call him or her directly. If you have a voice telephone and want to talk to someone who has a textphone, or vice versa, you can use RNID Typetalk, the national telephone relay service run by RNID and funded by BT.

Videophones

Deaf people can use videophones to communicate in sign language.



Visit www.rnidshop.com
to buy
equipment
online



This sign means that an induction loop has been installed

Listening equipment

There is a range of equipment to help deaf and hard of hearing people hear conversations, for example in the home, in the pub or at meetings. There is also equipment to help hear audiovisual equipment.

Conversation aids are small, easy-to-use and are ideal for one-to-one conversation in a quiet environment. More advanced radio microphone systems can also be used to listen at a distance in conferences, meetings or in more difficult listening situations.

Deaf and hard of hearing people can also use a neckloop, an ear loop, a listening aid or headphones to help them hear sound more clearly from their TV, video, radio, stereo system, CD or DVD player.

Loop and infrared systems

A loop system helps people who use a hearing aid or loop listener to hear sounds more clearly by reducing or cutting out background noise. Infrared systems are an alternative to loop systems. You will often find loop or infrared systems installed in places such as theatres, cinemas, banks, shopping centres and train stations. Smaller systems can be installed in the home.

Subtitles

Many deaf and hard of hearing people prefer to watch subtitled television programmes and subtitled films at the cinema, on DVD or video tape.

Buying equipment

If you would like to buy equipment for someone who is deaf or hard of hearing, visit RNID's website at www.rnid.org.uk/equipment for details of products, suppliers and costs. If you do not have access to the Internet contact RNID's Information Line.

You can also visit the RNID Shop at www.rnidshop.com to buy equipment online. Alternatively, send off for a copy of the RNID Sound Advantage Solutions catalogue.

RNID Sound Advantage

RNID Sound Advantage, 1 Metro Centre,
Welbeck Way, Peterborough PE2 7UH.
Tel: 01733 232607. Textphone: 01733 238020.
Fax: 01733 361161.
E-mail: solutions@rnid.org.uk
Website: www.rnid.org.uk



Communication support can help deaf staff in meetings

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA)

The aim of the DDA is to stop discrimination against deaf or disabled people as employees, pupils, students or customers who buy goods, or use facilities or services. You can contact the RNID Information Line for information about how you can meet your legal obligations towards your deaf employees, students or customers.

If you are an employer

Under the DDA, employers cannot treat deaf employees or job applicants less favourably than hearing people. This covers recruitment procedures as well as employment.

If you provide goods or services

The DDA says that if you provide goods and services to the general public it is unlawful for you to refuse to serve a deaf person, or to provide a service of a lower standard or on worse terms to a deaf person. You must also take steps to make your services more accessible to deaf people.

If you are an education provider

From 1 September 2002, the DDA also made it unlawful for educational institutions to discriminate against deaf or disabled people.

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 Typetalk, 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 May 2003.

This leaflet is part of RNID's **general** 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
London EC1Y 8SL

Telephone 0808 808 0123

Textphone 0808 808 9000

Fax 020 7296 8199

informationline@rnid.org.uk

www.rnid.org.uk

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