Living with someone who has a gradual hearing loss

About this factsheet

This factsheet is part of RNID's **general** range. It is written for the partners of people whose hearing has gradually worsened as they have got older.

In this factsheet we look at:

- How to identify if your partner's hearing is getting worse.
- What it means for you and your partner if he or she has a hearing loss.
- Hearing aids.
- Tips to help you communicate more effectively with your partner and to help you both in everyday situations.
- Ways to help you look after yourself.
- Benefits and equipment.

At the end of this factsheet we give you details of organisations you can contact for further information.

If you would like this factsheet on audio tape, in braille or in large print, fill in the *Want to know more?* form at the end of this factsheet and send it to RNID.

How to identify if your partner's hearing is getting worse

You may find that your partner:

- Needs a lot of the conversation repeated several times.
- Misunderstands what is being said.

- Complains that you are not speaking clearly or loud enough.
- Does not hear you when you come into a room.
- Does not hear the doorbell or the telephone ring.
- Cannot cope with pubs, parties and other noisy environments.
- Turns the television up too loud for your comfort.
- Begins to speak with a monotonous tone of voice, or is not speaking as clearly as before.

How does my partner's hearing loss affect how he or she hears words?

If your partner has a gradual hearing loss he or she can usually hear the vowels sounds clearly but not the consonants. Unfortunately, it is the consonants that are crucial for carrying the meaning of words. The consonants are the high frequency sounds of speech. It is the high frequency sounds that are lost when hearing gets worse. For example, instead of hearing "What shall we have for supper?" your partner may hear "Wha- ar- we -av -or -ba?".

Your partner will gradually need to rely more on lipreading to 'fill in the gaps'. A lot of lipreading is guesswork. Some sounds and their lipshapes can be seen on the lips. However, these are easily confused because they look similar – for example, *p*, *m* or *b*. Other sounds are at the back of the throat, and are invisible, for example – *k* or *g*.

Lipreading can 'fill in' the consonants which can no longer be heard, but can lead to some misunderstandings – for example, 'Biscuit' looks like 'Big kiss'. For more information, see *Lipreading* later on in this factsheet.

What it means for your partner to have a hearing loss

- Chatting is hard work and tiring.

- Your partner will have less time to relax because he or she will be concentrating more on communication.
- Your partner may become isolated and start to miss social events, because communication becomes too much of a strain.
- Your partner may find that he or she cannot hear his or her voice, so they are unable to hear how clear or loud their speech is for others. Some hard of hearing people may slur some of their speech sounds, because they cannot hear their own voices to correct themselves.
- If your partner's hearing loss means that everyone's speech is quiet for him or her, then he or she will most probably start to speak more softly as well.
- Your partner may experience *loudness recruitment*. This is not unusual. Loudness recruitment is when a person finds it difficult to cope with loud noises such as the sound of the vacuum cleaner. If your partner has loudness recruitment, you may find that your partner will complain that he or she can't hear you, while at other times he or she may complain you are shouting.
- Your partner may have tinnitus – the noises that some people hear 'in the ears' or 'in the head' – buzzing, ringing, whistling, hissing and other sounds. For more information, see RNID's leaflet *Questions about tinnitus.*
- Your partner may also experience problems with his or her balance and feel dizzy. For more information on dizziness and balance problems, see RNID's leaflet *Dizziness and balance problems.*

What you can do to help your partner

It is important that you understand what has happened to your partner's hearing. Your partner and you both need to accept the hearing loss and be positive about it.

- Be supportive and patient.

- Don’t try to do everything for your partner – if the doorbell rings, encourage your partner to go and answer it.
- Try not to speak for your partner or leave him or her out of the conversation.
- Encourage your partner to explain his or her deafness to friends and family.
- Carry on socialising – don’t feel that you have to give up your normal social activities.
- Try not to let your partner apologise for being hard of hearing. It is no-one’s fault so there is no need for your partner to apologise for his or her hearing loss.
- Set a good example for others to follow. Speak clearly and a little more slowly so that your partner can understand you and other people can see how to communicate with your partner effectively.
- Encourage your partner to visit his or her GP to have his or her ears examined. The GP may refer your partner to a specialist at an ENT (ear, nose and throat) unit in the hospital. There may be a long waiting list, so encourage your partner to start the process as soon as it is possible.

Hearing aids

If your partner needs a hearing aid(s) it will benefit you both if you help him or her wear it correctly and look after it properly. For more information, see RNID’s factsheets and leaflets on hearing aids.

What it means for your partner to wear a hearing aid

Hearing aids help people with a hearing loss improve their level of hearing. Hearing aids *do not* restore hearing to normal levels.
Wearing the hearing aid(s) can be a big step for your partner to take. If your partner has been recommended to wear a hearing aid(s), remember

that it can take time for him or her to accept the doctor’s advice. If your partner has a job, he or she could be concerned about how to cope at work. Your partner may also worry about further hearing loss.

Even when the aid(s) is first fitted, your partner may be disappointed if it does not work as well as hoped. You can give your partner support and encouragement to wear the aid(s). Encourage him or her to begin wearing the aid(s) for five to 10 minutes a day. Once he or she is used to wearing it, encourage your partner to wear the aid(s) for longer periods of time.

If you partner still finds the aid(s) difficult or he or she thinks it is not working properly, encourage him or her to go back to the specialist who fitted the aid(s). You might like to go with your partner to the hearing aid clinic, so that you both understand the basics of how to use and maintain the hearing aid(s). You can also find out how your partner can benefit from support services such as hearing therapists or lipreading classes.

Some people feel self-conscious about wearing a hearing aid. Your partner may only want to wear it at certain times or in certain situations. If you can encourage your partner to wear the hearing aid more visibly most people will make a greater effort to communicate clearly.

Tips to help you communicate more effectively with your partner

- Make sure you have your partner’s attention before you say anything.
- Use your partner’s name to attract his or her attention. People usually hear their name better than they hear other words.

- Don’t approach your partner from behind, or tap him or her on the back to attract attention. Approach from the side or from in front.
- Turn the radio or the television off before you start a conversation.

Lipreading

Lipreading needs a lot of skill and concentration. You might like to try the following suggestions to make it easier for your partner to lipread you:

- Find a suitable environment with good lighting, away from noise and distractions.
- Sit or stand at the same level as your partner, about three to six feet away.
- Face the light, or your face will be in shadow.
- Make sure your partner is looking at your 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 your partner finds it difficult to follow.
- Check that your partner can follow you. Be patient and take time to communicate.

For more information on lipreading, see RNID’s leaflet *Lipspeaking and lipreading*.

Tips for everyday situations

You and your partner may want to try these tips for different social and everyday situations.

Going to the doctor or hospital

- Encourage your partner to tell everyone at the consultation or hospital appointment that he or she has a hearing loss and/or wears a hearing aid(s).
- If the doctor calls out the name of the next patient, your partner may no be able to hear. Remind him or her to tell the doctor.
- If your partner wears a hearing aid, he or she can ask to see the doctor in a room fitted with a loop system. A loop system helps people who use a hearing aid or loop listener hear sounds more clearly, by reducing or cutting out background noise. An infrared system is an alternative to loop systems.
- Encourage your partner to ask the doctor to move to a different chair to make it easier to lipread.
- Your partner can explain that it is difficult to lipread if the doctor is looking at a computer or writing on a pad whilst talking at the same time.
- If your partner is worried that he or she will not understand what the doctor is saying, go along to the surgery with your partner.
- Your partner could ask the GP to write down important details such as dates and times, prescriptions and how many times to take tablets.
- Your partner can ask for a lipspeaker or notetaker to be present if lipreading is hard and if the consultation has been requested by the medical staff. A lipspeaker or notetaker will need to be booked in advance. A lipspeaker repeats what a hearing person or speaker says

for you to lipread without using his or her voice. A notetaker is trained to take accurate and clear notes for deaf or hard of hearing people.

- Some doctors put a sticker on the patient's notes with a recognised symbol such as the Sympathetic Ear to show that this patient is hard of hearing or deaf. Your partner might want to ask for this.
- In hospital, your partner can ask for his or her notes to display clearly that he or she is hard of hearing so that staff are aware of it.

Going out to a restaurant/party/pub

- Your partner may not enjoy going out in too large a crowd as it is difficult to lipread many people at once.
- If you feel confident, you or your partner could ask the pub or restaurant manager to turn down the volume of background music if it is too loud. Explain how difficult it is for a hearing aid user to cope with background music.
- Sit on the 'better side' of your partner so that you can repeat key words that may have been missed. The 'better side' of your partner is the side he or she can hear most clearly on.
- If the room is noisy you may have to encourage your partner to speak a little louder so that *you* can hear. Your partner may not realise that he or she needs to adjust his or her speech volume to suit the environment.
- Choose a place where the lighting is suitable for lipreading.
- Try to sit away from the kitchen area, as banging doors and crockery being moved will affect someone who is wearing a hearing aid.

Cinema, concert and theatre visits

Cinemas, concert halls and theatres may be fitted with a loop or infrared system.

- Pre-book the best seats for watching, listening and using the loop or infrared system. It is a good idea for you or your partner to check when booking the tickets which seats are offered best coverage by the induction loop/infrared system.
- Check that the loop system is working. Ask for it to be switched on, if necessary. If it is not working properly, talk to the management and ask for the system to be checked.
- Your partner might like to turn down his or her hearing aid(s) at the end of a concert or play so that the noise when people clap is not uncomfortable.

Getting about

- Walk on your partner's 'better side'. Remember that if your partner needs to lipread, walking and talking at the same time is difficult.
- A car is noisy for a hearing aid user. Your partner can get loop systems to use in a car. See RNID's factsheet *Equipment for deaf people to use in cars.*
- Your partner will notice that information is often announced over loud speakers, for example on trains, or in stations. If you are with your partner, listen out for announcements and tell them what has been said.

Shopping

- Your partner might want to use a Sympathetic Hearing Scheme card and badges to let shop assistants know that he or she is deaf, hard of hearing or a lipreader. The card and badges are available from Hearing Concern. See *Further information* for contact details.
- Your partner should look out for the loop sign on counters. If the loop is not working, or the staff do not know how to use them, your partner should make a complaint.

- Lipreading through a glass screen can be difficult. Encourage your partner to ask for an interview without a glass screen.
- If your partner needs to have a longer conversation or deal with something in-depth at the bank, he or she can ask to be seen in a quiet room.

Going to meetings or places of worship

- Your partner should check whether there is a loop system available and whether it is working.
- Your partner might want to ask the meeting organisers to change the lighting to make lipreading easier.
- Your partner might want to book a lipspeaker or notetaker if necessary.
- Your partner should ask everyone to sit in the best position so that he or she can lipread.
- Your partner could ask for as much information in advance as possible, so that he or she is able to take part.

Looking after yourself

You may find that your partner's hearing loss makes it quite stressful for you to cope. Remember that feelings of frustration are normal when you cannot communicate with your partner as well as you used to. Here are some suggestions you might find useful:

- Take time out – share the load with another family member or family friend. Go out together with a mutual group of friends so that neither of you feels isolated.
- Have time for yourself – continue with your hobbies, sport activities or other interests. Do not feel you have to give up a hobby or interest because your partner is not able to share it with you.

- Discuss your needs and concerns with your partner, and if necessary, with your GP.

Getting help if you are a carer

If your partner's hearing loss means you are spending a lot of time caring for him or her, there are several organisations you can contact for help and support. See *Further information* later on in this factsheet.

Benefits

You and your partner may be able to claim some benefits because of his or her hearing loss. You may also be eligible for many other benefits that are not related to his or her deafness.

Contact the RNID Information Line for advice on what you and your partner may be able to claim. See *Further information from RNID* for contact details. You may also like to read RNID's leaflet *Benefits and services for deaf people.*

Know your rights

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) aims to stop discrimination against deaf or disabled people as customers who buy goods, or use facilities or services provided to the general public. The DDA states that a service provider, for example a doctor, solicitor or a theatre, cannot discriminate against you by refusing to provide you with a service, treating you in a worse manner or providing the service on worse terms. A service provider may have to make a reasonable adjustment to its service, including providing equipment, if that will help you use the service –this can include making sure loop systems are turned on.

The DDA also applies to education. If your partner wants to take a course, the course provider may have to make reasonable adjustments and must not treat your partner less favourably than other people because of his or her hearing loss.

For more information, see RNID’s factsheets about the DDA.

Special equipment

There is a range of equipment available to help your partner in the home, car, workplace and when out socialising. For more information, see RNID’s leaflet *Equipment for deaf and hard of hearing people*.

Getting equipment from your social services department

Your partner may be able to get some kinds of equipment from your local social services department (SSD). SSDs vary both in terms of the equipment they supply and whether they charge for it. They are encouraged to provide ‘Direct Payment Schemes’, which give people who are eligible money to buy their own services, including equipment. For more information about their policy contact your social worker with deaf people or your local SSD. You will find details of your local SSD in telephone directories under the name of your local council.

Buying equipment

You can get up-to-date information about equipment by visiting RNID’s website www.rnid.org.uk/equipment and looking at our database of equipment. You will find details of products, manufacturers, suppliers and costs. If you do not have access to the Internet, you can contact RNID’s Information Line (details below) for the same information. You will need to say that you don’t have access to the Internet and ask for a printout from the equipment database.

RNID Sound Advantage

You can also visit the RNID Shop at www.rnidshop.com to buy some of the equipment online. Alternatively, send off for a copy of the RNID Sound Advantage *Solutions* catalogue, which gives details of equipment for deaf and hard of hearing people.

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.rnidshop.com

Further information

The Princess Royal Trust for Carers

The Trust runs a network of over 100 carers' centres around the country. The Trust provides information and support to carers.
The Princess Royal Trust for Carers,142 Minories, London EC3N 1LB.
Tel: 0207 480 7788. Fax: 0207 481 4729
Email: info@carers.org   Website: www.carers.org

Hearing Concern

Hearing Concern is a charity for deaf and hard of hearing people. It has volunteers who will offer support in the home throughout the country.
Hearing Concern, 7-11 Armstrong Road, London W3 7JL.
Sympathetic Hearing Scheme Tel: 0208 740 4447.
Tel: 0845 0744600. Textphone: 0845 0744600. Fax: 0208 742 9043.
E-mail: info@hearingconcern.org   Website: www.hearingconcern.org

Further information from RNID

If you want to find out more about some of the subjects covered in this factsheet, contact the RNID Information Line for our factsheets and leaflets.

Age Concern with help from RNID has also published a book called *Caring for someone with a hearing loss.* The book costs £6.99 and is available to order from the RNID Information Line.

The RNID Information Line offers a wide range of information on many aspects of deafness and hearing loss, including details about your local hard of hearing and lipreading classes. You can contact us for further copies of this factsheet and the full range of RNID information factsheets and leaflets.

RNID Information Line

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

Alternatively, fill in the *Want to know more?* order form at the end of this factsheet and return it to RNID.

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Lloyds TSB

Lloyds TSB has chosen RNID as charity of the year for 2002.

RNID Information, December 2002

Want to know more?

This factsheet is available in **audio tape**, **braille** and **large print**. We can also send you more information on many of the subjects covered in this factsheet. 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:

Living with someone who has a gradual hearing loss ☐ audio tape ☐ braille ☐ large print

☐ The RNID *Publications Catalogue*.

☐ Information about RNID Typetalk and BT TextDirect.

☐ Details of RNID communication services in my area.

☐ 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.

☐ A copy of the RNID Sound Advantage *Solutions* catalogue, giving details of equipment for deaf and hard of hearing people.

☐ Other information – please tell us what you would like to know.

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We are always keen to know what our customers think about our publications. If you have any suggestions for ways we could improve this factsheet you can use the space below. Please send your suggestions to the address overleaf.

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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 the database. ☐

We will use any information you give below to monitor requests for this factsheet and 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

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 information in another language?

☐ Yes. Please tell us which one.

Are you?

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

If we could provide it, would you like to receive information in a different format? Please use number 1,2, 3 or 4 to show your preferred choice.

☐ Printed information in British Sign Language (BSL) word order
☐ Videotape in BSL and with subtitles
☐ E-mail
☐ Face-to-face

Please return this form to: RNID Information Line, 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL or order from our website at www.rnid.org.uk