



Hearing Loss And Deaf Awareness

An Advice Guide
for Usdaw Reps



What is Hearing Loss?

Hearing loss and deafness happen when sound signals don't reach the brain. This is caused by a problem in the hearing system. Hearing loss is very common and there are over 12 million people in the UK with some form of hearing loss – that is one in five of the population.

Hearing loss covers a wide range of conditions, from people who are profoundly deaf and may lipread or use sign language to those with mild hearing loss for whom following speech in a noisy environment may be difficult.

Getting older is the most common cause of hearing loss as hearing declines with age. Exposure to loud noise is the second biggest cause. Some types of hearing loss and deafness can also be inherited.

Signs of Hearing Loss

It's not always easy to tell if you're losing your hearing.

Common signs include:

- Difficulty hearing other people clearly and misunderstanding what they say, especially in noisy places.
- Asking people to repeat themselves.
- Listening to music or watching TV with the volume higher than other people need.

- Difficulty hearing on the phone.
- Finding it hard to keep up with a conversation.
- Feeling tired or stressed from having to concentrate while listening.

Someone else might notice problems with your hearing before you do. If you think you are experiencing issues with your hearing, speak to your GP or a hearing specialist for advice about steps to improve what you hear.

Hearing loss is defined as one of three types:

- Conductive (involves outer or middle ear).
- Sensorineural (involves inner ear).
- Mixed (combination of the two).

Aging and chronic exposure to loud noises both contribute to hearing loss. Other factors, such as excessive earwax, can temporarily reduce how well your ears conduct sounds.

Age-Related Hearing Loss

Age-related damage to the inner ear is the single biggest cause of hearing loss.

Most of us will experience some level of hearing loss as we age due to gradual damage to the organs in the ear. This type of hearing loss tends to affect both ears and increases as you get older. Many people find hearing aids can help with what they can hear.

Sudden Hearing Loss

Sudden hearing loss can affect one or both ears. It can happen instantly or over the course of a few weeks, and you might also have tinnitus or balance problems. Recovering from sudden hearing loss will depend on the cause and how badly you're affected.

Causes can include: ear wax; infections; trauma; ototoxic drugs; acoustic neuromas and Ménière's disease.

Noise-Induced Hearing Loss

Noise-induced hearing loss is caused by being around very loud noises for a long time. This could include being in a noisy workplace, listening to loud music or loud bursts of sound, like gunshot or explosions.

Genetic Hearing Loss and Deafness

Some types of deafness can be inherited. In the UK, about one in 1,600 children is born moderately to profoundly deaf because they inherit a gene.

If you are deaf or if hearing loss runs in your family, genetic information may help identify the cause of your condition. It may also identify whether you are likely to have a child who is deaf.

Tinnitus

Tinnitus is ringing, buzzing, hissing or roaring sounds in the ear(s) or head that no one else can hear. The noise may be there all of the time, or it may come and go.

Tinnitus isn't the same as hearing loss. It can be a symptom of hearing loss, however not everyone with tinnitus will have hearing loss, and vice versa.

It affects people in different ways. Most people who have the condition aren't troubled by it or may find it only moderately annoying. However, some people find that tinnitus has a severe impact on their life, causing, or worsening, conditions such as anxiety, hearing difficulties, sleep problems, concentration difficulties and depression. How loud tinnitus is, or what it sounds like, doesn't seem to make a difference to whether it troubles people or not.

Facts About Hearing Loss

- There are more than 12 million people in the UK with some form of hearing loss, or one in five of the population - it is incredibly common.
- More than 900,000 people in the UK are severely or profoundly deaf.
- More than 70% of over 70 year olds and 40% of over 50 year olds have some kind of hearing loss.
- 24,000 people across the UK use sign language as their main language - although this is likely to be an underestimate.
- Around 6.7 million people could benefit from hearing aids.
- On average it takes ten years for people to address their hearing loss.
- Around one in every eight UK adults has tinnitus. This increases to one in four for those over 70 years old.

The Effect of Hearing Loss

Hearing loss can have a big impact on a person's quality of life, both physically and emotionally. Hearing loss has been linked to stress, depression, and loneliness, and it can also impact on a person's physical health.

Despite the negative impact on mental and physical health, evidence shows that people wait on average 10 years before seeking help with hearing loss. This means there may be many members with an undiagnosed hearing loss.

People with hearing loss face barriers to communication, making it harder to interact with friends, family, health professionals and colleagues. This often results in people withdrawing from social situations and becoming isolated.

In the workplace, these barriers to communication can have an impact on performance - for example finding it difficult to interact with customers, or not hearing requests from managers - which has the potential to lead to problems at work for members with hearing loss.



While hearing aids and cochlear implants can greatly improve what a person can hear, they cannot restore full hearing. Where there is a lot of background noise, for example, it can still be very difficult to follow a conversation, as all sounds the hearing aid picks up are amplified. So in a busy workplace, someone who is wearing a hearing aid may still have difficulties with communication. Research by The Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID), the UK's leading charity supporting people with hearing loss, has shown the impact hearing loss can have on people in work:

- Around three-quarters of respondents felt their employment opportunities were more limited because of their hearing loss.
- Approximately two-thirds said they sometimes felt isolated at work because of their hearing loss.
- 70% of respondents agreed that hearing loss sometimes prevented them from fulfilling their potential at work.
- Difficulties in fulfilling day-to-day tasks, such as using the phone, or communication challenges with colleagues were often cited as reasons for leaving work.
- Nearly eight in ten identified the attitude of employers as the main cause of problems at work (as opposed to the hearing loss itself).

British Sign Language (BSL) and The Deaf Community

Many people who are born deaf or are deafened early in life use sign language to communicate. Using the 2011 census, we can estimate that there are 24,326 people in the UK aged three and over who use sign language as their main language, although this is likely to be an underestimate. This is only a small proportion of the 900,000 people in the UK who are severely or profoundly deaf.

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



Communication Tips

The Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID), the UK's leading charity supporting people with hearing loss, offers the following advice on communicating with someone with hearing loss:

- Always ask what each person's preference is: even if someone's wearing a hearing aid, ask if they need to lipread you.
- Make sure you have the person's attention before you start speaking.
- Find a place to talk that has good lighting, away from noise and distractions.
- Turn your face towards them so they can easily see your lip movements.
- Speak clearly, not too slowly, and use normal lip movements, facial expressions and gestures.
- Make sure what you're saying is being understood.
- If someone doesn't understand what you've said, try saying it in a different way.
- Keep your voice down: it's uncomfortable for a hearing aid user if you shout, and it looks aggressive.
- Get to the point: use plain language and don't waffle.
- If you're talking to one person with hearing loss and one without, focus on both of them.

Supporting Members With Hearing Loss

Members with hearing loss may not think of themselves as disabled. However, they may have rights under the law that can help them at work.

The Equality Act (DDA in Northern Ireland) gives disabled people a number of important rights and protections.

Many members with hearing loss will be covered by the Equality Act, though not all. Very few conditions are automatically covered under the

Act and hearing loss is not one of them. Instead, you have to show that a member meets the definition of a disabled person as set out in the Act. If you can show that the member meets this definition, you will have a much stronger case in arguing that the employer should support the member.

When deciding if a member is covered by the Equality Act (DDA in Northern Ireland), look at the following five points:

1. Does the member have a physical or mental impairment?

Hearing loss is clearly a physical impairment so members with hearing loss would normally meet this definition. A person with hearing loss may not 'look disabled' and managers may therefore not believe they need support. It is not always obvious that someone is disabled. Nonetheless they can be covered by the Equality Act (see *Hidden Disability - An advice guide for Usdaw Reps*, Leaflet 446).

2. Is it more than a trivial condition?

Those with a very mild hearing loss may be able to communicate and hear without too much difficulty. However, the more severe the hearing loss, the more difficulty people will have communicating, especially in noisy areas such as the shop floor. If a member finds it difficult to hear conversation that someone without hearing loss has no trouble with, then this would be more than trivial.

3. Has the condition lasted or will it last for more than a year?

Hearing loss is usually permanent (unless it is linked to a build-up of ear wax for example), therefore most types of hearing loss will meet this definition.

4. What would happen if the member stopped taking medication?

This is a key issue for someone with hearing loss, as hearing aids can often help to improve their hearing. Employers may argue that the member is not disabled because their hearing aid means they can hear. However, in deciding whether or not someone is disabled they must be assessed as if they were not taking medication or using a medical aid (such as hearing aids). This means that a person who would meet the criteria for protection under the Equality Act, but whose hearing is improved by hearing aids, would still come under the definition of a disabled person. This is because the hearing aid(s) mitigate for the hearing loss, they do not make the hearing loss go away.

5. Does the condition affect the member's everyday life?

If you can show that the member's hearing loss has a substantial effect on how they carry out normal day-to-day activities, they should meet this definition. Speak to the member about how their hearing loss affects them - do they have difficulty hearing customers for example. Then go through a typical day with them and ask how their hearing loss affects their day-to-day activities.

Reasonable Adjustments

If you can show that the member meets these five criteria they would be entitled to the protection of the Equality Act. The employer would then have a duty to make what are called reasonable adjustments to take account of the member's hearing loss. This means that they have to change some aspect of the member's working arrangements to help them stay in or get back to work (for more information see *Reasonable Adjustments - A guide for Usdaw reps*, Leaflet 439).

The member will be the best judge of what adjustments they need but examples of reasonable adjustments could include:

- Hearing loops. A hearing loop consists of a microphone to pick up speech, which is then transmitted directly to a hearing aid. They can be used in a number of settings, but may be particularly appropriate for use on a checkout for example.
- Visual alerts in place of sound alerts. For example where age-restricted products are passed through the till, a visual prompt will be more useful to a member with hearing loss than a sound.
- Changing elements of a member's job which their hearing loss makes particularly difficult. For example if they are working in a particularly noisy area, this could make communication much more difficult.
- Educating staff to ensure they are aware of the member's hearing loss and know what they can do to communicate effectively with them (see section on communication tips).
- In some circumstances, it may be reasonable to offer sign language interpreters where someone predominantly uses BSL and they cannot communicate without a signer.
- Support to attend lipreading training. Lipreading is an essential skill for many people with hearing loss. Support could include paid release, or help with the cost of training if free classes aren't available.



Noise at Work

Evidence shows that exposure to excessive noise at work is a major cause of hearing loss. Members in workplaces with high levels of noise, such as manufacturing and food processing, could be at an increased risk of hearing loss.

There are regulations (the Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005), that put responsibility on employers to provide personal hearing protection where noise is above a certain level. If you believe noise levels in your workplace are dangerously high, you can speak to the Union's Health and Safety section for advice.



Useful Organisations

The Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID)

The UK's largest charity providing advice and support for people with hearing loss and campaigning on hearing loss and deaf awareness.

Tel: **0808 808 0123** (Telephone)
18001 followed by **0808 808 0123**
(Relay UK)
07360 268 988 (Text your question)
web: www.rnid.org.uk
email: contact@rnid.org.uk

Hearing Link UK

UK-wide charity supporting people with hearing loss, their families and friends.

Tel: **01844 348111**
web: www.hearinglink.org
email: helpdesk@hearinglink.org

British Deaf Association

The BDA offer services in every area of the UK to empower and support deaf people and campaign for legal status for BSL.

Tel: **020 7697 4140**
Text: **07795 410724**
web: www.bda.org.uk
email: bda@bda.org.uk

British Tinnitus Association

National charity raising awareness and supporting people with tinnitus.

Helpline: **0800 018 0527**
web: www.tinnitus.org.uk
email: helpline@tinnitus.org.uk



The Social vs the Medical Model of Disability

For some time now disabled people have emphasised that it is not so much their disability that prevents them from fully participating in society, but instead it is the way in which society fails to make adjustments for their disability that excludes them.

This emphasis on changing the barriers put up by society, rather than seeing the disabled person as the 'problem', is known as the 'social model of disability'. In other words, disabled people are people with impairments/health conditions who are disabled by discrimination, exclusion, prejudice and negative attitudes towards disability. Their impairment is not the problem.

The 'medical model' attributes the problems resulting from a disability to medical conditions alone. It concentrates on a person's impairment. Rather than focusing on the barriers society throws up that prevent disabled people from participating equally, the 'medical model' focuses on what disabled people should do to adapt to fit into the world as it is. If they are unable to adapt, the medical model accepts their exclusion.

For example, while a mobility difficulty can have an adverse effect on a person's ability to walk, the fact that the transport system is inaccessible to them has a far greater effect on their ability to get around.

The law is unfortunately rooted in the medical model. It has been rightly criticised for focusing on an individual's impairments and their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities, rather than on getting rid of the barriers society puts in the way of disabled people.

This leaflet is designed to help understand how the law can support disabled members in the workplace and therefore tends to focus on the medical model.



More Information

Usdaw Nationwide

Wherever you work, an Usdaw rep or official (Area Organiser) is not far away. For further information or assistance, contact your Usdaw rep or local Usdaw office. Alternatively you can phone our Freephone Helpline **0800 030 80 30** to connect you to your regional office or visit our website: www.usdaw.org.uk

You can also write to the Union's Head Office. Just write **FREEPOST USDAW** on the envelope and put it in the post.

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