

Unilateral Hearing Loss

Unilateral hearing loss in children and adults has been viewed from significantly impacting a person's quality of life to simply being an unfortunate inconvenience. Therefore, it is important to understand unilateral hearing loss and how it may be monitored and treated.^{1,2}

Basically, unilateral hearing loss means a hearing loss in one ear, but it may be more practically defined as an abnormal sensory experience in one ear. While this definition sounds very broad, it helps to emphasize that there are a wide range of abnormalities that may help to describe a person's unilateral hearing loss. For example, a unilateral hearing loss may range from mild to profound in severity. It may be conductive (outer and middle ear) or sensori-neural (inner ear and connecting neural structure). It may be accompanied by discomfort, or it may be painless. It may be short-lived or chronic. It may be congenital (from birth) or acquired after birth. It may be accompanied with tinnitus (noise in ear) that is intermittent or continuous. Therefore, unilateral hearing loss encompasses a wide array of potential characteristics with the likelihood that no two are exactly alike.

It is estimated that approximately one in every 1,000 newborns has a unilateral hearing loss.¹ Estimates increase to about 3 percent for children entering their first year of school.

Children and adults with unilateral hearing loss have been identified as "at-risk" in research reports, meaning that quality of life may be impacted beyond a person's loss of hearing. While there are studies reporting that children and adults who have unilateral hearing loss have lower academic test scores in educational settings, many children and adults effectively compensate and appear to have few measurable problems with academic performance. Therefore, complicating the issue of a unilateral hearing loss are the personal characteristics of the person who experiences it.

The unknown with unilateral hearing loss, however, is predicting how much negative effect it may have had or will have on a person's life. If there is one profound error too often made in analyzing the impact of unilateral hearing loss, it is guessing about past and future experiences such as academic failure, emotional problems, behavior problems, embarrassment, feelings of inferiority, stress, self-esteem, and



teacher perceptions. Therefore, it is important for you to discuss the facts of your hearing loss with your audiologist and be honest about how it is affecting your life.

Treatment of a unilateral hearing loss should always include regularly scheduled examinations to monitor the patient. Treatment may range from doing little and permitting the patient to learn to compensate to more elaborate measures like rehabilitation training, personal amplification devices, educational monitoring, or the use of special technology in the patient's classroom or workplace.

The use and benefits of personal amplification, such as hearing aids or frequency modulation (FM) systems, are not always clearly understood. There are a wide range of costs involved in personal amplification: purchase, maintenance, replacement, personal acceptance, and social and emotional adjustments to wearing the device. Sometimes patients feel the benefits of amplification are not justified by its actual costs but, generally, most patients and family members report favorable results when costs and benefits are contrasted.^{1,2} Therefore, if personal amplification has been prescribed for your unilateral hearing loss, it is important to understand the benefits relative to costs and to work toward obtaining all possible benefits.

While a unilateral hearing loss only affects one ear, it may have a significant impact on your life. It is important to be evaluated by a hearing professional and get real information about your case. Your audiologist can help you decide the best course to take. 💰

REFERENCES

1. American Speech Language Hearing Association: www.asha.org/publications/leader/archives/2008/080122/f080122b.htm
2. American Speech Language Hearing Association: www.asha.org/public/hearing/disorders/UHLchildren.htm

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