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PATIENT EDUCATION

Do I Need to Learn Sign Language?

AS ADULTS AGE, they frequently experience problems hearing and understanding speech. Sometimes these communication problems are treated effectively with medical/surgical help; sometimes they are treated with amplification, such as hearing aids and assistive listening devices; and some problems are treated with a combination of both. Sign language is a third option that may be helpful for some patients. However, while the use of sign language has many benefits, it also has some limitations, such as where and when it may be used effectively.

Communication Settings

Hearing problems differ among individuals and are influenced by the wide variety of settings in which people communicate, including quiet, noisy and visually distracting conditions. Informal gestures frequently are used to make a point during verbal communication and may be used more frequently when communication is problematic, such as when there are sound and visual distractions. Informal gestures are of two primary forms. One has specific cultural meaning and sometimes global controversy, such as when a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” gesture is used. The second form has more universal meaning, like showing the size of an object or showing emotions such as fear, anger or love.

People who are deaf or hard of hearing also use formal gestures that have universal and complex meanings. These formal manual movements, or nonverbal communication methods, are called signed systems. Some signed systems emulate English, while others do not. Signed systems range from American Sign Language (ASL) to a variety of signed English strategies. Signed systems do not require that a person have the ability to hear in order to communicate, but communication partners must share an understanding of the language.

Learning and Using Signed Language

A shared understanding of a language is the common core requirement for language to be practical and effective. No matter what language is used, verbal or nonverbal, both communication partners must have a functional understanding of how it is to be used. Therefore, no matter what new signed system a person may learn, communication requires at least one other person who knows, or is willing to learn, the particular signed system.

With spoken language, different sounds are used to create words or expressions that carry meaning. Sign language systems are based on seeing, not hearing, as the most important tool used to communicate information. The major communication tools used are hand shapes, hand positions, body movements and positions, hand



and body gestures, facial expressions and other visual cues. Fluency, or ease of use, only becomes practical after study and repetition. Like any language system, time and practice must be invested for that language to be a useful part of a person's life.

The first step is to choose a signed system. Signed systems differ, sometimes in very dramatic ways. One of the most popular signed systems in the United States is ASL, but it is very different from spoken English. ASL has its own rules for grammar, punctuation and sentence order. While English speakers signal a question by using a particular tone of voice, ASL users do so by raising their eyebrows and widening the eyes. ASL users may ask a question simply by tilting their bodies forward while signaling with their eyes and eyebrows. They may choose synonyms to communicate common words. ASL also changes regionally; and ethnicity, gender and age may impact its use.

Talk to your audiologist to find out if a signed system might be beneficial for you. There are many different systems, and each must be learned correctly and practiced diligently. Your audiologist may recommend a teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing to help you better understand the differences among various forms of manual languages. If so, that teacher will become a member of your hearing health team. Your audiologist will coordinate the team so that each member helps guide you to the best decision for your communication needs. [Lipsum](#)

RESOURCES

- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association: www.asha.org/public/hearing/Hearing-Loss-in-Adults
- Gallaudet University: www.gallaudet.edu

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