

Ear Conditions

Understanding a Unilateral Hearing Loss (Hearing Loss in One Ear)

A unilateral hearing loss or hearing loss in one ear can be caused by injury to the head or ear, some diseases such as acoustic neuroma, an infection in one ear or as a result of treatment for some other condition such as a brain tumour.

If the hearing loss in the affected ear has occurred gradually it may not be particularly noticeable, because the normally functioning ear will dominate and enable the person to hear in most situations. However, a unilateral hearing loss can occur suddenly and cause initial disorientation.

The Impact of a Unilateral Hearing Loss

The impact of a unilateral hearing loss will depend on its severity; the more severe the hearing loss, the more the person will be aware of it. Those affected may initially have a sensation that their hearing is out of balance, comparable to the difference between stereo and mono sound when listening to music. Eventually, however, as the person adjusts to relying on one ear alone, this sensation tends to decrease.

A unilateral hearing loss effects a person's ability to detect where a sound is coming from - for this we need normal hearing in both ears. If a sound is coming from one side of a person, it will reach one ear fractionally before it reaches the other ear. Our brain is tuned to this time difference and so we are able to judge the direction of a sound. Normal hearing in both ears also allows us to hear sounds from different sources as coming from different directions.

An inability to judge the direction of sounds can cause difficulties when driving, when crossing busy roads and can have important implications for daily life at work and at home. Allowances need to be made for this.

Sounds are heard more loudly with two ears than with one. Two ears are also better at detecting faint signals in quiet listening conditions or when background noise is present. Because of this, people with a unilateral hearing loss will have more difficulty hearing in background noise, and may find background noise quite distracting.

If speech is coming from the side of the affected ear, the listener will be at a disadvantage, because speech will be heard at a softer level than normal. It may be possible to turn the head to correct this, depending on the situation. Most difficulties will occur, however, if speech is coming from the side of the affected ear and noise is coming from the side of the good ear.

Tactics and Strategies to Help

- Most people adapt to a hearing loss in one ear, relying on their good ear to do the work of both ears.
- Placing the telephone on the good hearing side is important, both at home and at work.
- Seating arrangements should also be considered, to avoid speech being directed to the affected ear.
- Background noise should be kept to a minimum if possible. This may involve turning off the radio or television during a conversation, moving away from the source of noise, or shutting a door or window to block the noise. Suitable soft furnishings in the home, such as curtains and carpeting, will help reduce background noise.

Hearing Aids

Some people with a unilateral hearing loss may need to know where a sound is coming from, while others may need hearing in both ears for their jobs, for example, a taxi driver whose poorer ear faces his passengers. A hearing aid can sometimes help in these situations.

In some cases, using a hearing aid on the poorer ear will assist, depending on the type and severity of hearing loss in that ear. In other cases, where a hearing aid cannot be fitted to the poorer ear, a CROS aid may be helpful. This type of hearing aid has a microphone that is worn on the side of the affected ear, so that sound is picked up, amplified and directed to the unaffected ear.

If the hearing in the good ear is below normal, a BICROS hearing aid may be appropriate. In this case, a microphone is worn on each side of the head, feeding sound into one receiver on the better hearing side. With this arrangement, sound is picked up from both sides and delivered to the better ear, giving the user two-sided hearing with one hearing aid.

Care of the Ears

Relying on one ear means that it is most important to take care of the hearing in that ear. Regular hearing tests should be carried out, particularly if there is a concern about any hearing changes in the good ear.

Listening to excessive noise should be avoided, as this may cause damage to the hearing in the good ear.

It is sensible to avoid activities such as deep sea diving that may cause damage to the ear as a result of pressure changes.

For more information speak to an expert at:



Expression
Australia

Expression Australia

Email. info@expression.com.au

SMS/FaceTime. 0402 217 586

Skype. [expression.australia](https://www.skype.com/au/people/expressionaustralia)

Phone. (03) 9473 1111

expression.com.au

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Expression Australia

Level 4, 340 Albert Street, East Melbourne VIC 3002

expression.com.au

Victorian Deaf Society ABN. 56 004 058 084

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