The Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust

Sudden sensorineural hearing loss

Information for patients

Head and Neck

This leaflet provides information about sudden sensorineural hearing loss (SSNHL). It explains the possible symptoms, causes, investigations and treatment options for this condition.

What is a Sudden Sensorineural Hearing Loss?

Sudden sensorineural hearing loss (SSNHL) is a rapid loss of hearing that usually develops over a few hours to a day or two. It often affects one ear only. Some people notice it suddenly when they wake up in the morning or when using headphones or the telephone. The hearing loss can range from mild to severe and may affect different sound pitches. It can be associated with tinnitus in the affected ear.

What causes it?

The specific cause remains unknown in 75% of cases.

Causes include:

- Viral infections
- Reduced blood flow to the inner ear
- Inflammation affecting the hearing nerve
- Autoimmune conditions
- Toxic causes, including some drugs

Symptoms

Symptoms include:

- Sudden hearing loss in one ear
- Muffled or distorted hearing
- Tinnitus (ringing or buzzing sounds in the ear)
- A feeling of fullness or blockage in the ear
- Dizziness or balance problems
- Nausea
- Anxiety related to the sudden change in hearing

How is it diagnosed?

Depending on your symptoms You may require:

- Examination of the ears
- Hearing test (audiogram)
- Blood tests
- MRI or CT scan in some cases

This help confirm the hearing loss and excludes other causes. Some patients may also require further investigations or follow-up hearing tests.

Treatment

Treatment usually involves steroids, which help reduce inflammation in the inner ear. These may be given as:

- Steroid tablets
- Steroid injections through the ear drum

Treatment is most effective when started as soon as possible. Ideally the treatment should start within seven days of the onset of hearing loss and is unlikely to be beneficial if delayed more than two weeks.

Will my hearing recover?

Recovery varies from person to person. Some people recover fully, while others may have only partial improvement or permanent hearing loss.

Better recovery is more likely if the hearing loss is mild or moderate, treatment is started early and there are no severe balance symptoms.

Most hearing recovery occurs within 1 to 2 weeks of the symptom's onset/treatment. If hearing does not recover, a hearing aid may be an option for rehabilitation of hearing loss.

Long term effects

The dizziness, balance, and nausea symptoms often improve within eight weeks of the onset of symptoms.

Tinnitus can remain present even if hearing improves. Tinnitus management strategies, such as relaxation, sound therapy, and distraction methods may help make the tinnitus less intrusive.

Protecting your hearing

In some cases of sudden sensorineural hearing loss, hearing may not recover. If this happens, it is important to protect the remaining hearing in both ears. This can be supported by

reducing exposure to loud noise and using appropriate hearing protection in noisy environments.

Useful resources:

Ménière's & Vestibular UK
https://www.meandve.org.uk/

Tinnitus UK
https://tinnitus.org.uk/support-for-you/what-can-i-do/

RNID
https://rnid.org.uk/

Contact details

If you have any questions or queries, please contact the ENT outpatient department on:

ENT outpatient department - 0113 3922480

Your notes



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