



SUDDEN HEARING LOSS

Unfortunately, while gradual deterioration of hearing is common over the course of one's life, a sudden change in hearing is a potential indication of a medical problem that warrants urgent evaluation and treatment. Although most commonly the cause of this change in hearing can be as simple as having too much wax in the ear canal or fluid inside the eardrum, an ominous possibility may be damage to the portion of the inner ear responsible for hearing. This type of hearing loss is known as a sensorineural hearing loss and when it occurs suddenly is considered a true medical emergency. For this reason, it is important to seek consultation with an appropriate medical professional as soon as possible. As this condition can result in profound, permanent hearing loss and is not uncommon, this article will focus on the symptoms, causes, evaluation, and treatment of sudden sensorineural hearing loss (SSNHL) in the hope that it can be properly recognized and treated successfully.

By definition a sudden sensorineural hearing loss (SSNHL) is a moderate hearing loss affecting multiple frequencies that occurs in a period of less than three days. Nine out of **ten** times this affects only one ear. Most individuals simply notice that they cannot hear in the affected ear when talking on the telephone. Often times this can be preceded by a period of intense ringing or buzzing. It can also be accompanied by significant dizziness or nausea. Usually people otherwise feel fine. There is rarely any pain, fever, or fluid draining from the ear. This very rarely occurs in children and usually affects adults between the ages of 25 and 60.

The cause of sudden sensorineural hearing loss is perplexing. Even after thorough evaluation, in the overwhelming majority of cases the true cause still cannot be found. In these cases it is felt to be caused by either a viral infection or an immune system disorder. The end result of this process is an inflammatory disorder that causes damage to the hearing portion of the inner ear. Roughly 10% of patients affected by this disorder can be found to have a growth on the auditory nerve responsible for their hearing loss. Most times, hearing loss is the only symptom of that growth.

Any person who has a sudden and significant change in their hearing ability should be evaluated by a medical professional as soon as possible. Evaluation of a patient with sudden sensorineural hearing loss should initially focus on ruling out the everyday causes of sudden hearing loss. A very common and simple cause of sudden hearing loss is earwax filling the ear canal. This can be removed in the office with immediate return of hearing. Another routine cause of sudden hearing loss is fluid or infection underneath the eardrum. Although this is very common in children, it is actually very uncommon in adults and incorrect diagnosis of fluid underneath the eardrum is unfortunately a common cause of delay in treatment. Because of the seriousness of possible permanent hearing loss, visual inspection alone should not be trusted to support fluid as the cause of the hearing loss. If there is any question whether fluid is present, a hearing test or at least tuning fork testing should be performed to make certain of the diagnosis. Once the diagnosis of sudden sensorineural hearing loss is suspected, consultation with an ear nose and throat specialist should be arranged emergently if not done initially. Formal hearing evaluation will confirm the diagnosis. A complete history and physical exam will be performed to rule out lesser known causes of the hearing loss. An MRI exam of the head can be scheduled to rule out a growth on the auditory nerve. Sometimes laboratory testing is also required.

In the rare cases in which the true cause of the sudden hearing loss is discovered, there are well-established treatments. In the overwhelming majority of cases though, the cause is left unknown. Even without an exact cause, a variety of treatments have been developed in an effort to reverse

the hearing loss. Many of these treatments have not been shown to be any more effective than doing nothing. However, because an inflammatory process is responsible for the damage, the standard treatment involves taking steroid anti-inflammatory pills which have been shown to be beneficial in well controlled clinical trials. There is some evidence that antiviral medication as well as injections of steroid into the eardrum may be beneficial as well.

The timing of treatment after onset is the single most important factor in achieving clinical improvement. Research has shown that the earlier proper treatment is begun the better the outcome will be. In fact, if treatment is started greater than three weeks after onset, it may have no beneficial effect. Ideally, treatment should be started within the first day or two. For this reason, it is very important to schedule an appointment as soon as possible, so that treatment can be instituted while it can still be effective.

Sudden sensorineural hearing loss is a serious disorder with potentially permanent consequences that needs to be evaluated by one of our ENT specialists at Advanced ENT and Allergy. Delay in diagnosis or proper treatment can lead to severe and permanent hearing loss...so don't delay. Make an appointment at any of our eight convenient locations.

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