

Hearing loss: What is hearing loss?

NID Training Disability Diary

- Compiled by Dr Jean Mitchell



Introduction

Hearing is one of the human senses; the others are sight, smell, taste, and touch. All the senses are necessary for humans to perceive the world (Newman & Houchins, 2018). Hearing loss can occur when any part of the auditory system is damaged.

Discussion

Hearing is measured in units called decibels (dB) and a person is characterised as having hearing loss when his/her hearing ability is below 20 dB in both ears. Hearing loss can be categorised as mild, moderate, severe or profound and can affect one or both ears.

There is a difference between 'hard of hearing' and 'deaf'. Hard of hearing refers to people whose hearing loss ranges from mild to severe. People who are hard of hearing can communicate through spoken language, and they can benefit from hearing aids, cochlear implants and other devices. 'Deaf' people are those with profound hearing loss as they have little or no hearing. They often use sign language to communicate (Bell, 2013).

What causes hearing loss and deafness?

Although hearing loss and deafness can occur at any time during a person's life, there are critical periods when loss of hearing is more likely to happen. These periods include the prenatal period (before birth) perinatal period (early childhood), childhood and adolescence, adulthood and older age. Genetic factors, illness, consistent exposure to loud noise, head or ear trauma through injury, viral infections, certain medication, smoking and nutritional deficiencies are some of the causes of deafness that can occur at different times of a person's life.

Classifications of hearing loss

The type of hearing loss depends on where the damage has occurred. There are three major classifications of

hearing loss: conductive, sensory-neural and mixed.

Any of these classifications can include hearing loss that is bilateral (both ears) or unilateral (only one ear), symmetrical (same degree of hearing loss in both ears) or asymmetrical (the level of hearing loss is different in each ear), and sudden (acute or rapid onset) or progressive, when hearing loss becomes progressively worse over a period of time (Felman, 2019).

Conclusion

Hearing loss can occur when any parts of one or both ears are damaged, and at various times of a person's life. It is essential to consider the age of the onset of hearing loss (age when the hearing loss ensues) as hearing plays a vital part in communication, socialisation, and educational progress.

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