

# Understanding hearing loss

## A guide for human service providers

Hearing loss affects almost every part of a person's life, from social gatherings to work, and from making phone calls to accessing human services. Hearing loss can create communication barriers in all of those situations. Each person's experience with these barriers is unique, and how they communicate reflects their experience.

This guide offers human service providers basic information about hearing loss, effective communication strategies and accommodations to use with people who are deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing. The tips and resources here can help you make human services more accessible.



### Who hearing loss affects

Hearing loss affects people of all ages. About 20% of people over age 12, or one in five Minnesotans, have a hearing loss (Lin et al., 2011). It is true that hearing loss affects older adults the most:

- One in three adults between the ages of 65 and 74 has a hearing loss.
- One in two adults 75 years and older has a hearing loss.
- Sudden, noise-induced hearing loss and tinnitus are the most common disabilities affecting combat veterans (Hearing Health Foundation, 2020).

### Definitions

Terms used to describe hearing loss can convey degree and type. They can also express part of a person's identity. How a person identifies is a personal decision, often based on their degree of hearing loss, mode of communication and lived experiences.

**Deaf:** Someone who has a severe to profound

hearing loss and cannot understand speech without hearing aids. Even with hearing aids or a cochlear implant not everyone with severe to profound hearing loss can understand speech. People who use American Sign Language (ASL) may also belong to the Deaf community and embrace Deaf culture.

**Deafblind or dual sensory loss:** Someone who has both hearing loss and vision loss. This does not mean total lack of hearing and vision. For many people, this combination interferes with their ability to function effectively in the “hearing-sighted” world.

**Hard of hearing:** Someone with a hearing loss ranging from mild to severe can often benefit from the use of hearing aids or other assistive listening devices. Most use their voices to communicate, others use their voices and sign language.

### What are the signs of hearing loss?

People can experience hearing loss suddenly or gradually. Hearing loss can begin before birth, during childhood or later in life, so the signs of hearing loss can vary by person. However, a person

who has hearing loss may frequently:

- Have trouble distinguishing words that sound similar.
- Respond incorrectly in social situations.
- Turn head to one side or cup one ear to improve hearing.
- Respond with a smile and a nod without further comments.
- Have difficulty conversing in the car.
- Turn up volume too loud when watching television or listening to the radio.
- Intently watch others mouths.
- Ask others to repeat what they say.
- Have difficulty hearing on the phone.
- Find it hard to follow conversations in a group setting and noisy situations.
- Avoid or withdraw from social situations.
- Complain that people mumble.

## Education and learning

Hearing loss does not reflect a person's intelligence or ability to learn. However, as Jane Madell, a pediatric audiologist and speech and language pathologist, says, "children learn more than 80% of what they know through incidental learning. That means they learn by overhearing things around them" (Madell, 2013). Hearing loss clearly has an impact on incidental learning.

Children who are deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing often receive special education services and accommodations, including:

- Teachers licensed to work with students who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- Speech and language pathologists to provide additional speech and language support.
- Educational audiologists and specialized amplification.
- Interpreters and notetakers.
- Special seating.
- Captions for videos and films.

These accommodations give students access to communication. They also give students opportunities to learn vocabulary and grammar, and get the help they need to succeed in school.

A student's academic success is often related to how fully their language was developed in their early years (Hrastinski & Wilbur, 2016).

## Employment

Many jobs require some form of verbal communication with colleagues, supervisors and the public. People who are deaf and hard of hearing communicate with others in many different ways. They may use apps on a smartphone or tablet, writing back and forth or interpreters. People unfamiliar with hearing loss may feel awkward and resistant to using these communication tools. As a result, sometimes people with hearing loss miss information important to their jobs. Employers then develop negative views about their deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing employees' work performance.

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires employers to provide communication access in the workplace. Accommodations might include:

- Assistive technology
- American Sign Language interpreters
- Real-time captioning (also called Communication Access Realtime Translation, or CART)
- Written agendas and instructions for job assignments
- Communication apps for smart phones and tablets

All of these tools can break down the



communication barriers experienced by people who are deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing at work.

## Risks associated with untreated hearing loss

The risks of hearing loss depend on the type, degree, and age when the person acquires the hearing loss. It typically takes seven years for a person to recognize a hearing loss and then do something about it. Then only 20% of people diagnosed with hearing loss treat their hearing loss (Reed et al., 2019). Ignoring hearing loss leads to other health risks:

- Untreated hearing loss increases the risk of dementia and faster cognitive decline. Initial studies have suggested that treatment, including wearing hearing aids, improves outcomes (Johns Hopkins, 2013a).
- People whose hearing loss develops later in life may experience social isolation and may withdraw. They may develop depression and anxiety.
- Untreated hearing loss triples a person's risk of falling. This risk increases with every ten-decibel decrease in hearing (Johns Hopkins, 2012).
- People with untreated hearing loss are hospitalized 32% more often than their peers with typical hearing. They are also readmitted to the hospital within 30 days of discharge 30% more often (Johns Hopkins, 2013b).

When people who are deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing need mental health services, they require providers who understand their unique life experiences and needs. Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Division's [Mental Health Program](https://mn.gov/deaf-hard-of-hearing/hearing-loss/adults/referrals/) (mn.gov/deaf-hard-of-hearing/hearing-loss/adults/referrals/) has mental health therapists with expertise in these areas, and are fluent in American Sign Language.

## Communication strategies

Several strategies can help when talking with a person who has hearing loss:

- Choose a quiet, well-lit place to talk. Make



sure to sit away from large windows to avoid shadows.

- Make sure your face and mouth are clearly visible. Do not eat, chew gum or cover your mouth while speaking. Look at the person you are speaking with and maintain eye contact.
- Make sure you have the person's attention before speaking.
- Rephrase your message if the person does not understand you.
- Point to appropriate objects or use visual aids.
- Speak clearly and at a normal pace. Avoid exaggerated lip movements or shouting.

Many people read lips or speech read. Be aware that this is often not an effective way to communicate. Only 30% of speech sounds are visible on the mouth. The remaining 70% of speech sounds are made inside the mouth. This means someone lip reading has to guess at 70% of what is said! Check for understanding and have an assistive listening device available. Provide interpreters or real-time captioning (CART) if needed.

## Assistive devices and technology

People who are deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing can use different kinds of technology to help them communicate more easily. Assistive technology also gives them access to everyday sounds like doorbells and smoke detectors. This helps them maintain their independence and safety.

Assistive technology is available at a wide range of prices. Assistive technology includes:



- Assistive listening devices
- Apps for tablets and smartphones
- Real-time captioning or Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART)
- Hearing aids or cochlear implants

It is important to work with consumers to learn where they have a hard time hearing and what their needs are. People who are hard of hearing and wear hearing aids often have improved access to sounds and speech. However, hearing aids and cochlear implants do not restore hearing to “normal” and the sound is not the same as typical hearing. Encourage consumers to see an audiologist for treatment recommendations, coping strategies and/or auxiliary aids based on their hearing loss.

## Interpreters

Deaf or hard of hearing people have a right to clear communication when they need services from a government agency, business or non-profit organization. The Americans with Disabilities Act protects that right. For many people who are deaf, this means providing an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter.

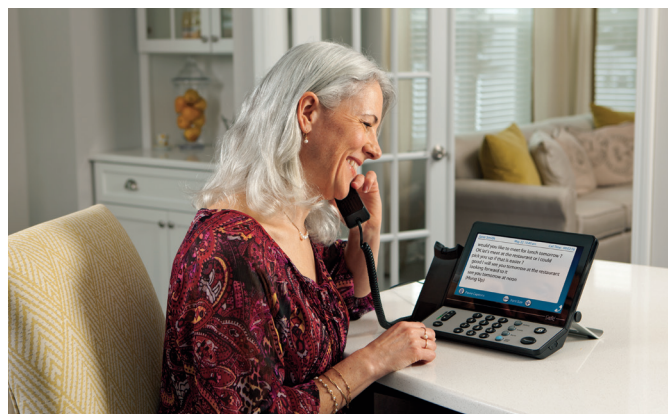
When working with an interpreter:

- Provide a place for the interpreter to sit near the person doing most of the speaking.
- Speak naturally and ask participants to speak one at a time.
- Know that everything the interpreter hears will be interpreted.
- Talk directly to the person who is deaf or person with hearing loss, not the interpreter.
- Do not ask the interpreter to comment on the content of the meeting.

## Phone

Some people with hearing loss may have difficulty hearing on the phone. To help ensure the caller gets the information they need:

- Do not eat or chew gum while on a call.
- Speak directly into the mouthpiece or microphone.



- Speak clearly at a normal pace and volume.
- Enunciate your words. Do not mumble.
- Introduce one idea or question at a time.
- Rephrase your message if the person does not understand you.
- If the person is having difficulty understanding you, ask, “What can I do to help you hear me or understand me better?”
- Remain patient and flexible.

Some people with hearing loss use relay services when calling for information and services. When a person uses a relay service to make a call, a communication assistant facilitates the conversation. The conversation is confidential. You may or may not hear the announcing of relay services. You may notice there are longer pauses between when you speak and when the caller responds. This is because the communication assistant is communicating what you said to the caller and is waiting for the caller to respond. Please wait for the response.

If a consumer seems to have trouble hearing on the phone, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Division can help. The [Telephone Equipment Distribution Program](https://mn.gov/deaf-hard-of-hearing/communication-access/ted/) (mn.gov/deaf-hard-of-hearing/communication-access/ted/) provides adaptive and assistive phone devices, such as amplified or captioned telephones, interconnectivity devices and ring signaling devices. Devices are provided at no cost to those who qualify.

## Training

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services offers training for agencies interested in learning about hearing

loss. Training can be provided in person or online and can be customized to meet the agency's needs.

Training videos and modules about a variety of topics can be found in the [Learning center](https://mn.gov/deaf-hard-of-hearing/learning-center) (mn.gov/deaf-hard-of-hearing/learning-center) on Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Division's website.

Ask about continuing education credits for nurses and social workers.

## More resources from Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Division

Hearing loss affects many people in many ways. Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Division is here to help. Contact us for more information and resources.

Many resources are available on [our website](https://mn.gov/deaf-hard-of-hearing) (mn.gov/deaf-hard-of-hearing). The website offers information about the Mental Health Program and the Telephone Equipment Distribution Program. You can also find information about assistive technology, communicating with people with hearing loss, finding and working with interpreters and much more.

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