



## Hearing Impairment

If you go to the search engine on the net to find the definition of a hearing loss, you will find many definitions. But in a simplest term, a hearing loss or hearing impairment simply means your decreased ability to hear sounds. And being a hearing-impaired person does not mean that you are deaf! This is more of a terminology problem. When someone said that you are deaf, it means that your hearing loss is in the severe-to-profound area. Someone with a hearing loss of less than these degrees of impairment is considered as a hard-of-hearing person.

If the hearing loss occurs at a young age or at birth and it is left untreated or not detected early in life, it will result in other impairment secondary to the hearing loss. These include a perceptual problem (i.e. difficulty in identifying objects and events by their sounds), acquiring spoken speech and language, a cognitive problem, social, emotional, educational, intellectual and vocational. Lacking in verbal skills, general knowledge, academic training and social skills will limit the hearing-impaired child's opportunities to gain employment when he or she reaches adulthood. As for adults, hearing loss leads to the feeling of isolation, depression due to inability to participate in conversations, or may affect a marriage if the spouse does not understand or know that the other partner is having a hearing difficulty, which has always mistakenly thought like 'he is switching-off his ears from me!'

Hearing loss can be of various degrees - ranging from mild to profound. The impact of the impairment on communication in adults or speech and language development in children will vary according to the degree of hearing loss. However, the perceived handicap due to hearing impairment varies across individuals, irrespective of the degree of the hearing loss. The configuration of the loss also varies; sometimes this can be due to the different causes of the impairment.

There are also various types of hearing loss. Some cases of hearing loss are medically-treated, which means, your hearing sensitivity will be back within the normal range once your medical ear problems have been treated. These include cases like infection of the ear, fluid 'behind the eardrum or what we call as a 'glue ear', perforated eardrum, or impacted wax in the ear canal. This temporary type of hearing loss is termed as a 'conductive hearing loss'.

Some other cases of hearing loss however, are of a permanent type. This is termed as 'sensorineural' hearing loss. This involves the damage to the hearing organ, or the cochlea (the spiral shape organ located within the temporal bone or the skull) or damage at the hearing nerves. These cases are not medically-treated.

The other type of hearing loss is a mixed loss. If the doctor or your audiologist said you have a mixed hearing loss, it means that you are having both the temporary and permanent types of hearing loss. The hearing level can only be improved by as much as the loss caused by the temporary ear problem when it has been treated (such as the resolved glue ear or the repaired perforated eardrum).

Generally, you need to see a medical doctor specializing in treating ear diseases (known as the Ear Nose & Throat, ENT specialist) to treat any medical problems related to the ear. If the hearing impairment still persists following any medical treatment indicated, it is the job of an audiologist to manage the case.

Who is an audiologist?

An audiologist is a hearing health care specialist. They are graduate professionals, specializing in managing people with hearing impairment. The audiologist will carefully examine your case history; that is the audiologist will find out all about your hearing loss through an initial interview including any ENT and medical history and evaluate your hearing sensitivity to determine the configuration, type and degree of hearing loss. Commonly, an audiologist will suggest for hearing aid fitting to help you to hear better, or improve the audibility of speech as well as environmental sounds that you have missed because of your hearing loss. The audiologist will fit the hearing aid and evaluate the suitability of the hearing aids according to patients' individual needs. They will also help you to cope with the device, help you to listen through this electronic device and assess your functionality in the 'real world' with the hearing aids.

Audiologists may also suggest for a cochlear implant to those who have no or very limited benefit from the use of hearing aids due to the severity of the loss. However, one will need to go through a very comprehensive assessment by different professionals to determine the suitability of a candidate for a cochlear implant. Please ask your audiologist for more information about the implant.