



Hearing Loss in One Ear

Almost all infants are now screened for hearing loss shortly after birth. About one out of every five babies who are found to have hearing loss have hearing loss in just one ear. This is called *unilateral hearing loss*.

My child still hears fine out of one ear – should I be concerned?

Many people think that if you hear fine in one ear that the other ear will make up for the ear with the hearing loss. This is not true. Having typical hearing in only one ear can result in learning problems that parents need to know about.

Think about how you and your child learned to walk. Most of us have two feet that work together to help us walk and run. Now imagine if you had one foot that was typical and one foot that did not move as well, or was even half of a foot. With one typical foot and part of another foot, a child can still learn to walk and run, but maybe not as fast or smoothly as children with two typical feet. This is most true on uneven ground or when running in a race. Can the one typical foot really make up for the other half foot? Not entirely, but having one typical foot does work fine in many situations. Similarly, one ear cannot listen the same as two ears in all situations. Two ears working together are needed to figure out where sound is coming from. Two ears help us hear better in noisier places. Also, two ears listening together hear just a bit better than one ear working alone. It is very important for learning both at home and at school for a child to hear as well as possible with both of their ears!

Listening Challenges

Children are like little sponges and learn language by hearing it from the people who are around them every day. Any time when listening is not easy it will be harder for a child with unilateral hearing loss to pick up new words. One of the biggest challenges for people with hearing loss in one ear is listening in noisy situations. Having the TV on a lot is just noise to a baby and it can make it really hard for your child to pick up new words from you. Hearing from a distance is also a challenge. Your child can hear you best if you are within a few feet of your child when you talk to him. Because of these listening challenges, children with hearing loss in one ear often need help to clearly hear what you say, as well as what teachers say in school, and what their friends say during play. Without this help, children with unilateral hearing loss may be **10 times** more likely to fail a grade in school or need special help to keep up in school. **1/3 to 1/2** of children with hearing loss who have not received help to hear better have problems learning in school!!!

What should I watch for?

- **One-third** of children with normal hearing in one ear and hearing loss in the other ear are slower to develop how they express themselves with words. The delays don't often show up until the child is about 18 months old.
- **One-fifth** of children with hearing loss in one ear have some problems getting along with others. They might make poor behavior choices or not be able to play easily with others.
- **One-fourth** of the children with hearing loss in one ear have hearing changes in their better ear over time. They might develop permanent hearing loss in their "good ear", usually by the time they start school. Also, all children can have hearing that comes and goes if they have ear infections - this makes it harder to listen.

What else should I do?

1. Advocate for your child and their need to hear as well as possible with both of their ears. Some doctors and teachers may not understand that children with hearing loss in just one ear can still have real problems listening and learning.
2. Be sure to get your child's hearing rechecked at least two times a year. Get it checked any time you think he is not hearing as well as he did.

3. Ask your doctor or audiologist about getting a hearing aid for your child. Having 'balanced' hearing will help him listen better in background noise. Because of how a baby's brain works, he needs to start using a hearing aid as a baby. This way the brain learns to hear and understand with both ears. Waiting to see if your child needs a hearing aid later, such as waiting until he is five-years-old and starting kindergarten, is not the best way to help your child. Talk to your doctor or audiologist right away and find out how much a hearing aid can help your child.

Here are some things that parents of children with unilateral hearing loss who used a hearing aid have said:

- *He doesn't talk so loud when wearing his aid.*
- *He was missing one-half of everything before he got his aid.*
- *He hears sounds he never heard before.*
- *He doesn't interrupt people in group situations now.*

4. If your child is a baby, ask about getting help from your local Infant and Toddler Intervention Program. Early intervention professionals will work with you to check to make sure your child is learning to listen and talk the same as children with two hearing ears. They can also help with you and your child to learn about hearing with a hearing aid. If your child is in school, share information with his teacher.
5. Start thinking about your child's school classes early. Classrooms for young children are active, noisy places and the teacher is often across the room or moving around a lot with the children. A child who has hearing challenges at home in noise and at a distance is likely to experience difficulty hearing in school as well. Parents can identify times when their child has more trouble listening. This can help as you plan with your child's school teachers to try to prevent learning problems by helping your child hear as well as possible.

Related Resources

- Unilateral Hearing Loss in Children (American Speech Language Hearing Association)
 - <http://www.asha.org/public/hearing/disorders/UHLchildren.htm>
- Unilateral Hearing Loss Tips for Parents (Hands & Voices)
 - http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/early_intervention/uni_loss_tips.html
- Potential Consequences of Unilateral Hearing Loss (Pediatrics for Parents)
 - http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0816/is_8_21/ai_n13676520/

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