

UNILATERAL HEARING LOSS

A unilateral hearing loss affects only one ear. The amount of loss in that ear can range from mild to total hearing loss. If the loss is mild, it is still possible to hear some sounds, but if the hearing loss is total, even very loud sounds will not be heard in that ear. When a unilateral hearing loss is suspected, it is important to see an audiologist for a complete hearing evaluation to determine the exact degree and type of hearing loss. It is also important to see an otolaryngologist, a physician who specializes in diseases of the ear. The doctor will determine if the hearing loss is medically treatable and whether or not it is associated with any other health problems.

Effects of a Unilateral Hearing Loss

Because one ear still has normal hearing, a child will hear well in most situations, but may experience problems with the following:

- Hearing sounds directed toward the poorer ear
- Locating the source of sounds (this is called localization)
- Understanding speech in a noisy background, especially if the good ear is close to the noise.

Although some children with unilateral hearing loss receive benefit from the use of a hearing aid, a standard hearing aid may not be helpful when the hearing loss is more severe.

Effects of a Unilateral Hearing Loss on School Performance

Many children with unilateral hearing loss do well in school and their performance remains unaffected by the loss. However, studies have suggested that 25-35% of children with unilateral hearing loss are at risk for failing a grade in school.

These children may be distractible or have a limited attention span. They may also have problems following directions or show signs of fatigue as the school day progresses.

Your child's teacher should be made aware of the hearing loss so that classroom performance can be closely monitored. If hearing problems are causing academic problems, an involved teacher can help to make sure that this is discovered as soon as possible.

In the classroom, your child's normal hearing ear should be closest to the teacher or main sound source. This might mean changing seats for different classroom activities. Limiting background noise will make it easier for your child to hear and understand speech. Common noise sources in classrooms include air conditioners, fans, heating units, doors, group work by other children, computer terminals, and pencil sharpeners. Any noise in a classroom is made worse by the reverberation or "echo" caused by hard floors and walls.

If you and your child's teacher feel your child is having difficulty hearing in school, there are assistive listening devices that might help. The audiologist will be able to discuss this with you in detail.

Unilateral Hearing Loss and a Child's Safety

A unilateral hearing loss makes it difficult to tell what direction sound is coming from. For this reason, it is important to teach your child to rely more on vision than on hearing in hazardous situations. Teach your child to look carefully both ways before crossing the street. Put rear-view mirrors on your child's bicycle to help him or her detect approaching vehicles.

Unilateral Hearing Loss and the Child's Better Ear

In most cases of unilateral hearing loss, the better ear stays the same. It is important, however, to take precautions to protect your child's hearing. There are several steps you can take:

- Use earplugs to protect your child's hearing from very loud noises such as power tools, firecrackers, firearms, loud music, lawnmowers, snowmobiles or snow blowers.
- When your child has an ear infection, seek medical attention promptly. Your child's hearing can be affected by such problems.
- Have your child's hearing tested on a regular basis, as recommended by your physician and audiologist. If you suspect any change in hearing, it is best to have your child re-tested immediately.