

Our friendly helpline team is waiting
to answer your call or email.

Telephone 0808 808 0123
Textphone 0808 808 9000
Email information@hearingloss.org.uk

www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk

ACTION ON
HEARING
LOSS

Hyperacusis

THE FACTS

Hyperacusis

This factsheet is part of our **Ears and ear problems** range. It is written for adults who have hyperacusis and would like to understand more about their condition. If your child has hyperacusis, you should discuss this with your GP.

Read this factsheet to find out:

- What is hyperacusis?
- What does it feel like to have hyperacusis?
- What causes hyperacusis?
- What kind of treatment is available for hyperacusis?
- Are there ways I can help myself?
- Where can I get further information?

If you would like this factsheet on audio tape, in Braille or in large print, please contact our helpline – see front page for contact details.

What is hyperacusis?

Hyperacusis is an increased sensitivity to sounds. It means that you may feel pain or discomfort when you hear sounds that most people are able to tolerate; for example, the sound of cutlery on plates in a restaurant. Hyperacusis may come on gradually or suddenly. However, not all people with hyperacusis are affected by the same sounds.

You can get hyperacusis on its own or with a range of other conditions such as depression, migraine, Ménière's disease, chronic fatigue syndrome and visual over-sensitivity.

If you have hyperacusis, you may also have tinnitus. Tinnitus is the medical term to describe noises that people can hear in one ear, both ears, or in the head, such as ringing, buzzing or whistling. The sounds can vary from person to person, but the common link is that they do not have an external source. For more information, see range of materials about tinnitus.

What does it feel like to have hyperacusis?

If you have hyperacusis, sounds may feel painful or startling. This may make you feel angry, distressed or anxious. You may find yourself panicking when you try to get away from the sound. You may find that after being exposed to an uncomfortable sound, the

discomfort continues for a period of time afterwards and becomes worse if you hear the sound again.

Your reaction to an uncomfortable sound may be made worse if you are in an environment where you expect to hear the sound. When you are afraid of hearing a sound, you may become anxious, which increases your discomfort. When you are afraid or stressed, the brain produces substances that increase the sensitivity to sound. In this way, a vicious circle can develop. However, it is important to remember that everyone reacts differently to hyperacusis.

What causes hyperacusis?

There are probably several different causes of hyperacusis, but researchers don't have a clear understanding of why some people have it. It is possible that some functions of the hearing system, which normally 'balance' sounds and protect the system, may be affected.

When you are in a noisy environment, your brain sends 'information' about loud noise back to the inner ear, so that the 'volume' can be turned down and the inner ear can be protected. Damage to this feedback mechanism may be an underlying cause of hyperacusis.

The brain also plays a vital role in processing the sound signals it receives from the inner ear. Problems in the way these signals are processed could be another cause of hyperacusis.

We do know that some people first develop hyperacusis after sudden exposure to very high levels of noise or after a head injury. Such experiences may damage delicate structures within the inner ear, which could lead to hyperacusis.

What kind of treatment is available for hyperacusis?

If you think you have hyperacusis, you should visit your GP. Your GP may refer you to a specialist in audiological medicine or the ear, nose and throat (ENT) department of your local hospital. They will be able to investigate your hearing system, try to find a cause for your hyperacusis, and advise you on the most appropriate treatment.

You may need specialised advice on how to manage your hyperacusis – this will usually come from a hearing therapist or specialised audiologist. You may also be referred to a clinical psychologist or behavioural therapist to help you manage the anxiety, phobia, stress and avoidance that are associated with hyperacusis and can make it worse.

Auditory desensitisation

In treatment, you may be offered auditory desensitisation as part of an auditory retraining programme. This should be available through an audiology department and is usually carried out by an audiologist or hearing therapist.

Auditory desensitisation aims to help improve the level of noise you can tolerate and involves listening to different types of sound known as 'white', 'broadband' or 'pink' noise on a daily basis. This is played through small noise generators which you wear in your ear canal. You start by listening to a very low level of noise for a very short time. The level and length of time is gradually increased. Some people find this gives them initial relief, but auditory desensitisation is usually a long process and you may need to follow this treatment for at least 12 months to get a long-term positive effect.

Behaviour modification programme

An auditory desensitisation programme may be more effective if you follow a behaviour modification programme at the same time. A clinical psychologist can help design an individual programme for you. This aims to break down any routines that you may have developed to avoid noisy situations. It should also help you control the anxiety patterns that you may have developed because of the pain and distress caused by certain sounds.

Are there ways I can help myself?

If you have hyperacusis there are several things you can do:

- Try not to wear earmuffs or earplugs unless you really need to, and then only for short periods of time (see below for more information).
- Try not to avoid situations where you might hear sounds that will cause you discomfort.
- Try to avoid being in a completely quiet environment. It is important to try to listen to everyday sounds, as a quiet environment tends to make hyperacusis worse.

Is it a good idea to use earplugs or earmuffs?

Some people with hyperacusis tend to use devices such as earplugs or earmuffs to block out sound. Your audiology specialist may refer to these as 'attenuators'. These may provide temporary relief, but in the long-term they can undo any progress you are making to adapt to sound. They can even make hyperacusis worse.

However, if you are exposed to very loud sounds for a long time, for example, in your job, this can make hyperacusis worse. Wearing special 'active' electronic sound attenuators and musicians' earplugs may help if you work in a noisy place. Your audiology department

may be able to provide these and suggest how best to use them. Our factsheet **Noise exposure** explains more and tells you where to buy equipment.

Where can I get further information?

Our helpline offers a wide range of information on many aspects of hearing loss. You can contact us for further copies of this factsheet and our full range of information factsheets and leaflets – see front page for contact details.

Acknowledgements

This factsheet was produced with the help of Linda Luxon, Professor of Audiological Medicine, Institute of Child Health and Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Trust; and Dr Borka Ceranic, Lecturer in Audiological Medicine, National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, London.

Action on Hearing Loss Information, May 2012

The Royal National Institute for Deaf People. Registered Office: 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL.

A company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales No. 454169, Registered Charity Numbers [207720](#) (England and Wales) and [SC038926](#) (Scotland).