

Newborn hearing screening

This factsheet is for parents, parents-to-be and carers of newborn babies, who would like to find out more about the NHS newborn hearing screening programme.

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What is the NHS newborn hearing screening programme?

The NHS newborn hearing screening programme offers all parents the opportunity to have their baby's hearing checked shortly after birth. It aims to identify permanent hearing loss in babies as soon as possible, so they can be given the best possible chance to develop language and communication skills at the same rate as hearing children. There are programmes in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland ([see page 5](#) for the programme websites).

Why is newborn hearing screening important?

According to the NHS, one to two babies in every 1,000 are born with permanent hearing loss in one or both ears. This increases to about one in every 100 babies who have spent more than 48 hours in intensive care. Approximately 90% of these babies are born to parents who are hearing.

If a child's hearing loss isn't identified early on, it can have a serious, long-term impact on:

- their ability to develop spoken language and communication skills
- their educational achievement, confidence and social skills.

If your child has hearing loss, the sooner you find out about it, the sooner you can take action to help them to develop language and communication skills.

It's now possible to make a very early start. Hearing aids can be fitted from two or three months old, and, if you want to, you can start using sign language earlier (just like how you speak to newborns who can hear). Early diagnosis also means you're given more time to think about these options.

What is the role of screening?

The screening test identifies whether your baby may have a hearing loss and needs referring to a local audiology service. Whatever the results, it's important that if your baby shows any signs of hearing loss later on, you see your GP straight away.

Any concerns you have about your child's hearing should be taken seriously and investigated properly. The checklist in your baby's personal child health record (the red book) explains how you can check your child's hearing as they grow up.

Where will my baby's hearing be screened?

If you give birth in a hospital and your area runs a hospital-based screening service, it's likely that specially trained staff will screen your baby's hearing before you go home.

In some places, newborn hearing screening is carried out as part of a community screening service, either in your own home or at a local health clinic. If your baby was born at home, or didn't have the screening test at birth, it may be carried out at home, or at your local GP surgery or health clinic.

The screening should take place in the first few weeks after your child's birth. If your baby's hearing has not been screened, ask your health visitor, midwife, local audiology department or GP to arrange an appointment.

What does newborn hearing screening involve?

Newborn hearing screening won't hurt your child – it is entirely safe and comfortable and will usually be carried out while your baby is asleep or settled. You can stay with your baby while the screening test is done.

The hearing screening test measures the function of the cochlea (hearing organ) in the inner ear. A trained hearing screener or your health visitor will carry out the test. They will place a small, soft-tipped earpiece in the outer part of your baby's ear, which sends clicking sounds down the ear. If your baby's cochlea is working it will produce a response that is picked up by the screening equipment. This type of test is called an **automated otoacoustic emission (AOAE) test** – it only takes a few minutes and gives results immediately. Both ears are checked.

If your baby's ear doesn't produce a response, it doesn't necessarily mean that they have a permanent hearing loss. It just means that more tests are needed to confirm whether or not their ear is responding normally. These further tests are equally simple and painless, but give more detailed information about your baby's hearing.

Sometimes, the response can't be recorded because of a temporary blockage in your baby's ear, because the environment is too noisy or because your baby is unsettled. So the test may need to be carried out again at a later date, or a different type of test may be used (see below).

Further tests that may be carried out

If the response can't be recorded, or if your baby has been in the special care baby unit, a second test will be carried out – the **automated auditory brainstem response (AABR) test**. Three small sensors are placed on your baby's forehead, neck and shoulder and soft headphones are placed over your baby's ears. Gentle clicking sounds are played through the headphones and the sensors record your baby's response to the sounds. Your baby will need to be asleep for this test, which usually takes between five and 15 minutes. It's safe, painless and the results will be available immediately. Again, you can stay with your baby while the test is carried out.

If the second test doesn't produce a clear response from one ear or both ears, your baby will be referred to a hearing specialist at an audiology department.

This often happens and doesn't necessarily mean that your baby has a permanent hearing loss.

The hearing specialist should see you within four weeks of your baby's first hearing test and the appointment usually takes one to two hours. The audiology team will carry out more in-depth tests, similar to those already carried out, which will provide more information about your child's hearing. The tests don't hurt and are not uncomfortable, and you can stay with your baby while they are carried out.

The hearing specialist will usually be able to give you the results of the tests at the end of the appointment. They will explain what the results mean and whether any further tests are needed.

What kind of support can I get if my baby has hearing loss?

It's natural to experience different emotions if you are told your child has hearing loss. You may feel overwhelmed by the amount of information you are given and you will probably have lots of questions.

There's a range of options and services available to you as a family, partly depending on the level of your baby's hearing loss.

You'll be able to get information about your options and support from a range of organisations:

- Your **local paediatric audiology service** will look into your baby's hearing loss and arrange for your baby to have hearing aids fitted, if they're suitable and that's what you want.
- If your baby has severe to profound hearing loss, they may be referred to a **specialist cochlear implant centre** for an assessment, if you are interested in this option. This will determine whether they could benefit from a cochlear implant, which is a small, electronic device designed to give people who are severely to profoundly deaf the sensation of hearing. There will be plenty of opportunities to discuss what will be best for your child.
- The **National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)** ([see page 5](#)) provides support and information and can put you in touch with other parents of children who are deaf or have hearing loss in your area. You may find their booklet *Parenting a deaf child* is a good place to start.
- Your **local education authority** should provide information, practical advice and support through regular home visits from a qualified teacher of the deaf. They will be available to support you with information about your options, and put you in contact with other professionals.

Your local council's **social services team** can also provide help, including:

- financial help – for example, money towards travel costs for hospital visits
- some aids and adaptations
- care at home
- holiday play schemes.

Your council has a duty to provide these services under the Children Act 1989. Some services are free of charge, but the council might ask you to contribute towards others. If you think your child may qualify, contact the social services team at your local council.

 Find out more about the support that you and your family are entitled to at gov.uk/help-for-disabled-child

Where can I get more information?

You can find out more about the newborn hearing screening programme in your country by visiting the relevant website:

England: nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pages/newborn-hearing-test.aspx

Wales: www.newbornhearingscreening.wales.nhs.uk

Scotland: healthscotland.com/topics/health/screening/pregnancynewborn.aspx

Northern Ireland: www.publichealth.hscni.net/directorate-public-health/service-development-and-screening/newborn-screening

National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)

NDCS is a national charity that provides a range of support and information for deaf children, young people and their families.

Ground Floor South
Castle House
37-45 Paul Street
London EC2A 4LS

Helpline/textphone: **0808 800 8880**

Fax: **020 7251 5020**

Email: ndcs@ndcs.org.uk

Website: ndcs.org.uk

Resources for parents of children aged 0-4 years: ndcs.org.uk/family_support/0_to_4_years/index.html (you'll need to register as a member but this is free)

Information you can trust

The Information Standard certifies us as producers of high-quality, evidence-based information. Thank you to **Gail Allan, Project Lead for the NHS Newborn Hearing Screening Programme, Public Health England**, for helping us to review and update this factsheet. For a list of references, please email references@hearingloss.org.uk

Did you find this factsheet helpful?

We'd love to know what you think of this factsheet – please email us at reviewpanel@hearingloss.org.uk

If you'd like to join our Readers' Panel, to help us create new publications and improve existing ones, please let us know.

Further information from Action on Hearing Loss

Our expert information covers everything you need to know about:

- hearing loss and deafness
- tinnitus
- ear problems and treatments
- hearing aids and cochlear implants
- useful products and technology
- communication tactics and support
- benefits and grants
- your rights.

Visit our website actiononhearingloss.org.uk or call our Information Line ([see last page](#)) for information, support and publications. You can also find out about services in your area, our hearing research, and how you can get involved.

Please help us support others

We provide our leaflets, factsheets and Information Line service free of charge to anyone affected by deafness, tinnitus or hearing loss in the UK. We rely on the generosity of our supporters to help us do this. We would be very grateful if you would consider making a donation - of as little or as much as you can afford.

Please send a cheque, payable to Action on Hearing Loss, to:

Freepost RTLX-CZKX-BTTZ
Action on Hearing Loss
1-3 Highbury Station Road
London N1 1SE
(No stamp needed)

Donate online at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/donate
Or make a donation over the phone by credit or debit card:

 **0203 227 6182**
 **0203 227 6185**

Thank you.

Our purpose is to help people confronting deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss to live the life they choose. We enable them to take control of their lives and remove the barriers in their way.

To find out more about what we do and how you can support us, go to actiononhearingloss.org.uk

Action on Hearing Loss Information Line

Telephone **0808 808 0123**
Textphone **0808 808 9000**
SMS **0780 000 0360**
(standard text message rates apply)
Email **information@hearingloss.org.uk**

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