

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

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ACTION ON
HEARING
LOSS

Facts and figures on hearing loss and tinnitus

THE FACTS

Facts and figures on hearing loss and tinnitus

This factsheet is part of our **Deaf awareness** range. It is written for anyone who is interested in the latest available figures on hearing loss and tinnitus among adults in the UK. For more about childhood deafness, for example, its impact on education, please contact NDCS (see page 10).

Read this factsheet to find out:

- How is hearing loss measured?
- What are the definitions of different levels of hearing loss?
- Where do we get information on hearing loss and tinnitus?
- How many people in the UK have some form of hearing loss?
- How many people in the UK are deafblind?
- How many people have hearing loss and additional disabilities?
- How do age and gender affect the figures?
- How many people use hearing aids?
- How many people use sign language?
- What are the figures relating to employment?
- How many people have tinnitus?
- 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.

How is hearing loss measured?

Hearing loss is measured by finding the quietest sounds someone can hear by using tones with different frequencies, which are heard as different pitches. The person being tested is asked to respond when they can hear a tone – usually by pressing a button – and the level of the tone is adjusted until they can just hear it. This level is called the threshold.

Thresholds are measured in units called dBHL – dB stands for ‘decibels’ and HL stands for ‘hearing level’. Anyone with thresholds between 0 and 20 dBHL across all the frequencies is considered to have ‘normal’ hearing. The greater the threshold level is – in dBHL – the worse the hearing loss.

What are the definitions of different levels of hearing loss?

Mild hearing loss

People with mild hearing loss can have some difficulty following speech, mainly in noisy situations. The quietest sounds they can hear average between 25 and 39 decibels.

Moderate hearing loss

People with moderate hearing loss may have difficulty following speech without hearing aids. The quietest sounds they can hear average between 40 and 69 decibels.

Severe hearing loss

People with severe hearing loss rely a lot on lipreading, even with hearing aids. BSL may be their first or preferred language. The quietest sounds they can hear average between 70 and 94 decibels.

Profound deafness

BSL may be the first or preferred language for people who are profoundly deaf, or they might communicate by lipreading. The quietest sounds they can hear average 95 decibels or more.

Where do we get information on hearing loss and tinnitus?

Unless specified otherwise, the facts and figures in this factsheet are from our 2011 report, *Hearing Matters: Taking action on hearing loss in the 21st century*, which incorporates new and published research. There is a full list of references in the back of the report. You can read *Hearing Matters* on our website (see the front page for contact details).

We have also used some information from organisations specialising in specific aspects of deafness and hearing loss. Contact details are at the end of this factsheet.

All figures given in this factsheet apply to the UK as a whole, unless otherwise specified.

How many people in the UK have some form of hearing loss?

There are more than 10 million people in the UK with some form of hearing loss, or one in six of the population. From the total figure, around 6.4 million are of retirement age (65+) and about 3.7 million are of working age (16 – 64).

From the total number of ten million, more than 800,000 people are severely or profoundly deaf.

Due to the ageing population of the UK, there will be an estimated 14.5 million people with hearing loss by 2031. The World Health Organisation predicts that by 2030 adult onset hearing loss will be in the top ten disease burdens in the UK, above diabetes and cataracts.

The following tables show estimated figures for the amount of people with hearing loss in the UK as a whole and for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

	Working age	Retirement age	Total
UK			
All hearing loss	3,721,000	6,390,500	10,111,500
Severe/ profound	135,500	685,000	820,500

	Working age	Retirement age	Total
England			
All hearing loss	3,106,000	5,344,500	8,450,500
Severe/ profound	122,000	575,500	697,500

	Working age	Retirement age	Total
Scotland			
All hearing loss	326,000	541,500	867,500
Severe/ profound	13,000	56,500	69,500

	Working age	Retirement age	Total
Wales			
All hearing loss	187,500	346,500	534,000
Severe/ profound	7,000*	37,500	44,500

	Working age	Retirement age	Total
Northern Ireland			
All hearing loss	130,500	157,000	287,500
Severe/ profound	4,000*	16,500	20,500

* Statistic lies within percentage margin of error

Childhood deafness

There are more than 45,000 deaf children in the UK, plus many more who experience temporary deafness due to conditions such as glue ear. Around half of all deaf children are born deaf, and around the same amount acquire deafness during childhood.

At least half of all childhood deafness is inherited. So far scientists have identified 80 genes related to a genetic predisposition to deafness.

Since the introduction of the MMR vaccine (measles, mumps and rubella), fewer babies are born deaf as a result of German measles (rubella) during pregnancy – the number of rubella infections in pregnant women fell from 167 in 1987, to one in 2003 (NHS Choices). This drop has been offset by more babies being born deaf from other causes, such as premature birth or lack of oxygen during birth. More babies survive with multiple disabilities than used to be the case.

Deafened people

The term 'deafened' describes people who have become profoundly deaf in adult life – it is also known as acquired profound hearing loss (APHL). It can happen suddenly or gradually, as a result of trauma, infection or ototoxic drugs (drugs that damage the inner ear or auditory nerve).

There are an estimated 150,000 deafened adults in the UK (Hearing Link – previously the LINK Centre for Deafened People). They often rely heavily on lipreading and written communication. They may require communication support, such as speech-to-text reporters, lipspeakers or notetakers, in situations where lipreading is difficult.

Hearing loss in black and minority ethnic groups

There are no accurate figures available for levels of hearing loss in black and minority ethnic groups. However, there is evidence to suggest that some minority ethnic groups may experience higher levels of hearing loss. This is especially true of recent immigrants from regions with greater levels of poverty, poor healthcare and low levels of immunisation against diseases such as rubella.

How many people in the UK are deafblind?

The Department of Health says people are deafblind 'if their combined sight and hearing impairment cause difficulties with communication, access to information and mobility'. There are an estimated 356,000 people with combined visual and hearing impairment in

the UK (Sense). Some are totally deaf and/ or totally blind, but others have some hearing and/ or some vision.

Nearly two thirds (62%) are aged 70 or over. By 2030, the number of deafblind people in the UK is set to increase by 60%, to 569,000, with the largest increase among older age groups (Sense).

For more information, see our factsheet *Deafblindness* or contact Sense.

How many people have hearing loss and additional disabilities?

Around half of older people in the UK have additional disabilities or long term health conditions as well as their hearing loss. As many as 40% of deaf children have additional or complex needs.

How do age and gender affect the figures?

Most of the 10 million people in the UK with hearing loss developed it as they get older. Age-related damage to the cochlea is the single biggest cause of hearing loss: 71.1% of over 70 year-olds and 41.7% of over 50 year-olds have some form of hearing loss.

There are 36,000 people aged 16-49 who are severely or profoundly deaf, and total of around 1.15 million with any hearing loss in the same age group. Around the age of 50 the proportion of people with hearing loss begins to increase sharply.

From the age of 40 onwards, a higher proportion of men than women develop hearing loss. This is probably because more men have been exposed to high levels of industrial noise. Among people over the age of 80, more women than men have hearing loss, which is due to women living longer than men on average, not because women are more likely to become deaf.

How many people use hearing aids?

About two million people in the UK have hearing aids, but only 1.4 million use them regularly. Out of the total of ten million people, more than six million (6,138,000) would benefit from hearing aids. This means there are at least another four million people who do not have hearing aids but would benefit from them.

On average it takes ten years for people to address their hearing loss. Even when they do take action, 45% of people with hearing aids say that their GP failed to refer them to an audiologist when they first mentioned their hearing loss.

How many people use sign language?

Many people who are born deaf or are deafened early in life use sign language to communicate. At the moment there are no reliable current figures on how many people in the UK use British Sign Language (BSL) as their first or preferred language, or how many people in Northern Ireland use Irish Sign Language (ISL). However, for the first time a question about sign language was included in the 2011 census. When the results are released, there will be a more accurate picture of how many people use sign language.

What are the figures relating to employment?

About 3.7 million people of working age (16 – 65 years) have hearing loss, and around 135,000 of them are severely or profoundly deaf. Severely and profoundly deaf people are four times more likely to be unemployed than the general population, even when there are low levels of unemployment.

From people with hearing loss in employment, more than half (55%) say they feel socially isolated at work and around one in four have been harassed in the workplace (26%) (Action on Hearing Loss, *Opportunity Blocked*). Less than half (45%) of people who lost their hearing at work told their colleagues about it, and fewer still (37%) told their employer.

How many people have tinnitus?

Tinnitus is the word for noises that some people hear in their ears or in their head – buzzing, ringing, hissing, and other sounds. Many people experience tinnitus at some time in their life, but for the majority it only lasts for a short time. For other people it is permanent, and can be either mild or severe.

About 10% of adults, or six million people, have constant mild tinnitus. Up to 1% of adults (60,000 people) have tinnitus that affects their quality of life. Like hearing loss, the risk of developing tinnitus increases with age. Up to 30% of over 70s experience tinnitus, compared to 12% of people in their 60s and just 1% of people aged under 45.

Where can I get further information?

Medical Research Council Institute of Hearing Research

Carries out research into hearing and hearing disorders.

University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD

Telephone 0115 922 3431

Fax 0115 951 8503

enquiries@ihr.mrc.ac.uk

www.ihr.mrc.ac.uk

National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)

Provides information and carries out research on childhood deafness.

15 Dufferin Street, London EC1Y 8UR

Tel/ textphone 020 7490 8656

Fax 020 7251 5020

ndcs@ndcs.org.uk

www.ndcs.org.uk

NHS Choices

Provides information about health conditions and treatments relating to hearing and ears.

www.nhs.uk

Office for National Statistics

Provides economic and social facts and figures.

Room 1.101, Government Buildings, Cardiff Road, Newport NP10 8XG

Telephone 0845 601 3034

Textphone 01633 815 044

Fax 01633 652 747

info@statistics.gov.uk

www.statistics.gov.uk

Sense

Offers information resources for deafblind people, parents, professionals and the public.

101 Pentonville Road, London N1 9LG

Telephone 0845 127 0060/ 020 7520 0999

Textphone 0845 127 0062/ 020 7520 0959

Fax 0845 127 0061/ 020 7520 0958

info@sense.org.uk

www.sense.org.uk

Further information from Action on Hearing Loss

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 factsheets and leaflets – see the cover page for contact details.

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