

- Unilateral
- Congenital/  
Acquired
- Ear Protection
- Assistive Listening  
Device



## Questions

- **What is a unilateral hearing loss?**
- **What causes a hearing loss in only one ear?**
- **Will the hearing in my child's better ear get worse?**
- **Why would my child have trouble hearing if one ear has normal hearing?**
- **Will my child benefit from wearing a hearing aid in the ear with the hearing loss?**
- **How will a unilateral hearing loss affect my child's performance in school?**
- **What are some ways to help my child understand what is said?**

- **What is a unilateral hearing loss?**

A person who has normal hearing in one ear and a permanent hearing loss, even a mild loss, in the other ear has a unilateral hearing loss.

- **What causes a hearing loss in only one ear?**

A **unilateral** hearing loss may be present from birth (**congenital**) or may occur later in life (**acquired**). **Congenital** causes include heredity, problems during pregnancy or delivery, or certain maternal illnesses, including cytomegalovirus (CMV). **Acquired** causes usually involve major illnesses such as mumps or meningitis, or head trauma. In the majority of cases, the exact cause is unknown.

- **Will the hearing in my child's better ear get worse?**

In most cases, the hearing in the good ear remains the same. Some data from newborn hearing screening suggests that hearing loss resulting from certain causes, including but not limited to CMV and some hereditary hearing loss, may progress from unilateral to bilateral (both ears) hearing loss. It's important to have your child's hearing tested on a regular basis. Discuss with your audiologist a monitoring plan that is appropriate for your child. It is also important to protect your child's good ear from damage. If your child gets an ear infection, seek medical attention quickly because fluid in the middle ear can temporarily affect your child's hearing. As your child gets older and may be exposed to very loud sounds such as power tools, firearms, loud music, and firecrackers, **ear protection** (custom ear plugs or headphones) is strongly recommended to protect your child's hearing by reducing the sound level that reaches your child's ears. Research has shown that high levels of noise can damage hearing.

- **Why would my child have trouble hearing if one ear has normal hearing?**

When a child has a **unilateral** hearing loss, the advantages of hearing with both ears are lost. Children with unilateral hearing loss may have difficulty localizing (being able to tell through hearing) where sound is coming from and in understanding speech, particularly when there is background noise. The degree of difficulty your child may experience may depend on the degree of the hearing loss.

- **Will my child benefit from wearing a hearing aid in the ear with the hearing loss?**

There is no one right answer to this question. Audiologists agree that there are advantages to listening with two ears (binaural hearing) but it is not certain that every child with a unilateral loss will benefit from wearing a hearing aid in the ear with the loss. In addition, when the difference in hearing between the two ears is

too great, it's not possible for the audiologist to fit a traditional hearing aid. The process of determining whether or not a hearing aid is beneficial may involve continued assessment and ongoing observation of your child's degree of listening difficulty at home, child care, and school. Another option is an **assistive listening device** such as a personal or sound field FM system. With an FM system, the speaker wears a microphone and child has a receiver. The speech signal is transmitted directly to the child via an FM signal. This direct transmission improves the loudness of the signal (speech) in relationship to the loudness of the background noise.

• **How will a unilateral hearing loss affect my child's performance in school?**

Many children with a unilateral hearing loss do well in school. Research shows, however, that children with unilateral hearing loss are at higher risk for academic difficulty. Possible classroom problems are understanding speech (especially in noise), short attention span, difficulty following directions, and distractibility. It's not yet known why some children with unilateral hearing loss have academic difficulty and others do not although research is being done in this area.

• **What are some ways to help my child understand what is said?**

The more opportunities your child has to hear language, the better it will be for his or her language development.

- Talk to your child about what is happening and the things that interest him/her.
- Emphasize important words and phrases and say them often, always in the context of what is happening.
- Give your child lots of opportunity to see, touch and experience what is happening so the words gain meaning.
- Whenever possible, have your child close to you when communicating with him/her. Your child will hear you more easily if you are on the side with the "good" ear.

Attention to the acoustic environment (how noisy or quiet it is around you) is also important.

- Minimize background noises such as the television.
- Have your child closer to the person who is talking than to the TV or whatever is making the noise.

If your child is in child care, share all of the information and ideas with his/her caregivers. Remember that the outward signs of your child's hearing difficulties may be very minimal and that many of your current actions are to help you be more aware of possible difficulties and to prevent future academic problems.