

Sudden Sensorineural Hearing Loss

Sudden Sensorineural Hearing Loss (SSHL), or sudden deafness, is a rapid loss of hearing. SSHL can happen to a person all at once or over a period of up to 3 days. It should be considered a medical emergency. A person who experiences SSHL should visit a doctor immediately.

A doctor can determine whether a person has experienced SSHL by conducting a normal hearing test. Hearing loss affects only one ear in 9 out of 10 people who experience SSHL. Many people notice it when they wake up in the morning. Others first notice it when they try to use the deafened ear, such as when they make a phone call. Still others notice a loud, alarming "pop" just before their hearing disappears. People with SSHL often experience dizziness or a ringing in their ears (**tinnitus**), or both.

Some patients recover completely without medical intervention, often within the first 3 days. This is called a **spontaneous recovery**. Others get better slowly over a 1 or 2 week period. Although a good to excellent recovery is likely, 15 percent of those with SSHL experience a hearing loss that gets worse over time. It can affect anyone, but for unknown reasons it happens most often to people between the ages of 30 and 60.

People who experience SSHL should see a physician immediately. Doctors believe that finding medical help fast increases the chances for recovery. The most common therapy for SSHL, especially in cases with an unknown cause, is treatment with steroids. Steroids are used to treat many different disorders and usually work to reduce inflammation, decrease swelling, and help the body fight illness. Steroid treatment helps some SSHL patients who also have conditions that affect the immune system, which is the body's defense against disease.

Though there are more than 100 possible causes of sudden deafness, it is rare for a specific cause to be precisely identified. Only 10 to 15 percent of patients with SSHL know what caused their loss. Normally, diagnosis is based on the patient's medical history. Possible causes include the following:

- Infectious diseases.
- Trauma, such as a head injury.
- Abnormal tissue growth.
- Immunologic diseases such as Cogan's syndrome.
- Toxic causes, such as snake bites.
- Ototoxic drugs (drugs that harm the ear).
- Circulatory problems.
- Neurologic causes such as multiple sclerosis.
- Meniere's Disease

Additional Resources:

American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery (AAO-HNS), www.entnet.org
Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (A.G. Bell), www.agbell.org