

Recognizing Early Signs of Hearing Loss In Infants and Toddlers

Learning starts at birth

An infant begins learning about the world right from the moment of birth, through the senses of hearing, sight, taste, smell and touch. Even before birth, babies can hear the sounds of the mother's body, and some sounds from the world outside. Babies use their sense of hearing to develop the amazing power of language in just a few short years. This development can be rapid and can seem almost effortless.

Without good hearing, learning how to speak can be a long and difficult process. Some learning experiences may be missed. It is important to recognize the signs of hearing loss in infants and toddlers as early as possible. In this way, the problems that may result from hearing loss can be lessened or prevented.

Parents are the best observers

Babies cannot tell us if they do not hear well, but there are signs to watch for. Parents are usually the first to know if there is a problem. Be aware of the way that infants and toddlers develop responses to sounds and understanding of language. Use the chart on the back of this page as a guideline. You can help to detect hearing loss very early.

Babies can hear the all the same sounds that you can hear, but the ability to respond to these sounds develops gradually. Newborns have clear reactions (like a startle) to very loud sounds, but reactions to softer sounds may not be so obvious. An infant will quickly learn to recognize voices, and may

become still or look around in response. However, a baby will not turn to the source of sound accurately until 4-6 months.

Risk factors for hearing loss

Certain factors in an infant's history may increase the chance of a hearing loss:

- A family member with permanent hearing loss since childhood;
- Very low birth weight – less than 3½ pounds;
- Serious infection present at birth (such as herpes, toxoplasmosis, cytomegalovirus or rubella);
- Baby required neonatal intensive care (NICU);
- Unusual appearance of baby's head, face or ears;
- Baby required exchange blood transfusion;
- Serious infection early in life (like meningitis or encephalitis);
- Serious injury to the head;
- Disorder of the brain or nervous system.

If your baby has any condition associated with hearing loss, a hearing test may be scheduled, or you may request one.

Temporary or permanent?

Most hearing losses in young children are temporary or medically treatable. A test by an audiologist will determine if this is the case. An audiologist is a person who has special training in hearing testing.

A few children will have permanent hearing loss. The earlier it is detected, the earlier help can be provided.

The hearing test

Your doctor or public health nurse will refer you for a test with an audiologist if you are concerned. The examination is designed for your baby's age level, and usually takes about 20 minutes. Results will show whether hearing is adequate, and what other steps may help. In some cases, repeat testing or specialized testing may be necessary.

What you can do

Observe your baby's development and provide opportunities for learning. If you suspect a problem, *don't delay!* All babies and toddlers can be given an accurate hearing test. It's never too early to ask.

Healthy Hearing Checklist

How will you know whether your baby can hear you? *Look for these behaviours:*

AT BIRTH

Does your baby sometimes...

- startle or cry at very loud noises?
- awaken or stir to loud sounds?
- appear to listen to voices?

BY THREE MONTHS

Does your baby sometimes...

- turn eyes toward interesting sounds?
- stop to listen to speech sounds?
- smile when spoken to?
- cry differently for different needs?

BY SIX MONTHS

Does your baby sometimes...

- turn his or her head in the direction of new sounds?
- respond to his or her name?
- babble a lot of different sounds?
- respond to changes in your tone of voice?

BY TWELVE MONTHS

Does your baby sometimes...

- understand simple requests?
- like to repeat some sounds you make?
- try to say his or her first words?
- recognize words for common items?
- imitate different speech sounds?

BY TWO YEARS

Does your child sometimes...

- point to pictures when they are named?
- point to body parts when asked?
- listen to stories, songs and rhymes?
- follow simple directions?
- use several different words?
- put two words together?

You should see most of these behaviours around the age levels shown.

For more BC HealthFile topics visit www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm, or visit your local public health unit.

Call the BC NurseLine to speak to a registered nurse, available 24-hours every day:

- In Greater Vancouver, call 604-215-4700
- In BC, call toll-free 1-866-215-4700
- Deaf and hearing-impaired, call 1-866-889-4700
- Pharmacist available 5pm to 9am every day
- Translation services in over 130 languages upon request.

Visit BC HealthGuide OnLine – a world of health information you can trust at www.bchealthguide.org