



DementiaUK
Helping families face dementia

Dementia and difficulty with sounds



Many people experience some degree of hearing loss as they get older, but people of all ages who have dementia may experience additional difficulties that are not related to changes in the ears themselves.

Dementia can affect how a person interprets information, so even if they do not have problems hearing, making sense of sounds can be difficult. They may:

- have trouble working out what is said to them and need longer to process it
- struggle to distinguish between multiple sounds or conversations
- be startled or frightened by loud or sudden noises
- have problems identifying what a sound is, or picking one sound out from another

As a result, it can be difficult for the person to process and understand what they are hearing and communicate their response. This can lead to them becoming withdrawn and socially isolated, and trigger feelings of anxiety, frustration, confusion and distress.

Hearing loss and dementia

Recent studies have revealed that people with hearing loss appear to be at an increased risk of developing dementia. It is not clear yet if hearing loss makes it more likely that someone will develop dementia, or if dementia itself makes it more difficult for people to hear.

If someone appears to be having hearing difficulties, it is important to book a hearing test. The person may simply have a build-up of wax or a cold or ear infection that is affecting their hearing; or they may have age-related hearing loss and benefit from using a hearing aid.

Hearing tests are available in many large pharmacies and opticians. These are often free and can usually be booked at relatively short notice. Alternatively, the person can be referred by their GP to an audiologist (hearing specialist) for a free NHS hearing test, although this may involve a longer wait.



Some audiologists specialise in treating people with dementia and can tailor hearing tests to meet their needs. If a person with dementia is diagnosed with hearing loss and needs a hearing aid, this may be hard for them to adapt to, so a dementia specialist audiologist can provide extra support and advice.

If the person is already a hearing aid user, it is important to keep their hearing aid maintained and checked regularly to make sure it is working properly. Hearing aid batteries need to be changed frequently, and hearing aids often beep when they need to be changed. This may cause confusion for a person with dementia.

Ways you can help

If you believe that someone with dementia is struggling to hear, understand and process sounds, and to communicate, try to recognise this and respond sensitively. These tips may help:

- Avoid places with loud or distracting background noise, such as restaurants and shopping centres, which might overwhelm and confuse the person with dementia. If you do go to these places, then try to choose quieter times in the day
- Turn off the television, radio or background music when you are talking to the person
- Face the person and make eye contact: 60-80% of communication is non-verbal and you can convey a lot through your tone of voice, gestures and body language
- Speak slowly and clearly, using simple words
- Give the person time to make sense of and process what they are hearing and react/respond. Do not be too quick to jump in and ask them if they have heard and understood you
- If, after a pause, the person seems not to have heard you or is having difficulty making sense of what you said, you may wish to prompt them gently – but be aware that some people find this frustrating and belittling
- If the person has difficulty processing sounds like the phone ringing or a kitchen timer sounding, consider using devices or settings with other ways of alerting them such as vibrating or flashing
- Use pictures if a person with dementia is struggling to understand what you are saying: for example, you could print out pictures of food and drink to find out what meals they prefer
- Try to avoid loud and unexpected noises such as slamming doors, fireworks, crackers and party poppers
- If the person tends to be overwhelmed by noise in public, wearing ear plugs or noise cancelling headphones may help



- Provide reassurance. Sometimes people with dementia hear sounds but are unable to give them context. For example, a washing machine beeping or car doors slamming could cause anxiety if they cannot understand the cause of the noise. Sit with the person, explain what is happening and calmly reassure them that there is nothing to worry about
- Try to write things down for the person if they are struggling to hear. Many people with dementia find it easier to understand written, rather than spoken, words
- If the person has difficulty using the phone, adjusting the ring tone and speaker volume may help. For some people, communicating by text or email is easier
- If the person works, it is helpful for them to tell their employer and/or colleagues about their dementia diagnosis and any difficulties with hearing or processing sound so they can put processes in place to support them, for example emailing them

details of a task rather than telling them verbally

- If the person has difficulty hearing or understanding what they hear, it is a good idea for someone to attend medical and other appointments with them to help them communicate and remember key information

It is important to consider the person's safety if they are having difficulty processing sounds – for instance, they may not recognise a smoke alarm beeping. If this is the case, there are telecare systems that link to smoke alarms/carbon monoxide detectors and alert a call centre if they are activated. If the person you care for would benefit from this, contact your local authority's social services department.

Keep in mind that not all sounds are problematic for a person with dementia. For example, hearing a piece of music from their youth or a special time in their life can provide comfort and relaxation, and sounds of nature such as birds singing or a water feature in a garden can be soothing and provide gentle sensory stimulation.

Deafness and dementia

If a person was deaf before their diagnosis of dementia and is a British Sign Language (BSL) user, they may need more specialist support. For example, if they need a carer to help them with personal care such as washing and dressing, it is a good idea if the carer understands sign language. They may need to learn some basic signs ie, 'toilet', 'thirsty', 'hungry', or they could show the person pictures to illustrate what they are going to do.

Just as hearing people with dementia may develop difficulties communicating verbally, sign language users may experience communication difficulties such as forgetting or mixing up signs. Some people may revert to signs they used in earlier childhood or have reduced hand movements.

Giving the person lots of time for communication, and being aware of non-verbal cues – such as pointing, gestures or facial expressions – can be helpful.

Sources of support

To speak to a specialist dementia nurse about difficulty with sounds or any other aspect of dementia, please call our Helpline on **0800 888 6678** (Monday to Friday 9am–9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am–5pm) or email helpline@dementiauk.org

To book a phone or video call appointment with an Admiral Nurse, please visit dementiauk.org/book-a-clinic-appointment

Dementia UK resources

Tips for better communication
[dementiauk.org/
better-communication](https://dementiauk.org/better-communication)

Changes in perception
and hallucinations
[dementiauk.org/
changes-in-perception](https://dementiauk.org/changes-in-perception)

Practical guide to getting
the best out of GP and other
health appointments
[dementiauk.org/
gp-appointments](https://dementiauk.org/gp-appointments)

Making the home safe and
comfortable for a person
with dementia
[dementiauk.org/safe-
comfortable-home](https://dementiauk.org/safe-comfortable-home)

Music and dementia
dementiauk.org/music

Other resources

NHS: hearing tests
[nhs.uk/conditions/
hearing-tests](https://nhs.uk/conditions/hearing-tests)

RNID: the national hearing
loss charity
rnid.org.uk

RNID: free online hearing check
[rnid.org.uk/information-
and-support/take-online-
hearing-check](https://rnid.org.uk/information-and-support/take-online-hearing-check)

British Deaf Association
bda.org.uk

ReSound: find a UK audiologist
[resound.com/en-gb/
find-a-professional](https://resound.com/en-gb/find-a-professional)

British Sign: learn British
Sign Language
british-sign.co.uk

The information in this leaflet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses. We hope you find it useful. If you have feedback, please email feedback@dementiauk.org

Publication date: February 2023

Review date: February 2025

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Thank you.



If you have questions or concerns about any aspect of dementia, please contact our Admiral Nurses.

Helpline: **0800 888 6678** or helpline@dementiauk.org

Virtual clinics: dementiauk.org/book-a-clinic-appointment



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