

Sudden Hearing Loss? Here's What to Do

Silence may be golden, but sudden silence is a serious health problem that needs to be addressed.

Sudden sensorineural hearing loss, which occurs when there is damage to the inner ear, affects 5 to 27 per 100,000 people annually. There are approximately 66,000 new cases each year in the U.S., according to the [American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery Foundation](#).

The organization recently announced new guidelines to help doctors quickly and accurately identify and treat the different causes of sudden hearing loss. Other benefits include reducing unnecessary tests, advancing hearing recovery, and improving patients' quality of life.

"When a patient complains of sudden hearing loss (which is often accompanied by dizziness or [tinnitus](#)), she or he cannot distinguish one cause from the other on the basis of their symptoms," said [Dr. Simon I. Angeli](#), an otolaryngologist who specializes in adult and pediatric hearing loss at the University of Miami Health System.

Yes, if you suddenly can't hear, you should [consult a specialist](#) - quickly.

From the onset of your symptoms, you and your doctor have a window of opportunity for salvaging your hearing. The bad news? It's often limited to just two to three weeks.

“Any delay in treatment is fraught with lesser chances of success,” Dr. Angeli said. “In addition, hearing loss can be the first sign of a more serious medical condition that may require early detection and treatment to prevent additional body dysfunction.” That’s why you should immediately seek medical attention with an ENT specialist if you experience such symptoms in one or both ears.

What should you expect when you see a hearing specialist?

Your doctor takes a history of your symptoms, performs an endoscopic or microscopic examination of your ears, and conducts a tuning fork exam and a hearing test.

This will reveal if you’re experiencing:

- Conductive hearing loss - when sounds can’t get to your inner ear, typically due to an obstruction or fluid in your ear canal, eardrum, or middle ear.
- Idiopathic sensorineural hearing loss - deafness that occurs suddenly from an unknown cause.
- Non-idiopathic sensorineural hearing loss (rare) - Your hearing loss may have a specific cause if you have symptoms like facial weakness, difficulty swallowing or breathing, changes in the level of consciousness, fever, skin rash, severe headache, vision difficulty, and ear drainage, among others.

“In addition, a magnetic resonance imaging with contrast is recommended to rule out a tumor of the hearing nerve. Other tests may be recommended if your history and physical examination suggest it,” Dr. Angeli said.

Can my sudden hearing loss be fixed?

“In some cases, hearing loss may improve spontaneously (that is, without any therapy),” Dr. Angeli said. In other cases, some patients don’t improve, despite the

recommended therapies or medications.

Based on your diagnosis, “an ENT will recommend treatments with minimal harm or side effects.” says Dr. Angeli. Your treatment and rehabilitation options may include hearing aids, tinnitus maskers, bone auditory implants, and cochlear implants.

Treatment can help, he says. Patients can rest assured that “good habilitation options exist, no matter how severe your hearing loss is.”

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