

# Facts and figures on deafness and tinnitus

## About this factsheet

This factsheet is part of RNID's **general** range. It is written for people who would like to know more about the numbers of deaf, hard of hearing and deafened people in the UK today. We also include figures for people with tinnitus.

At the end of this factsheet we give you details of organisations you can contact for further information.

This factsheet looks at:

- How hearing loss and deafness is measured.
- Definitions of deafness.
- Where we get information on deafness and tinnitus from.
- Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing adults and children.
- Deafblind people.
- Black and minority ethnic deaf and hard of hearing people.
- Deaf people with additional disabilities.
- How age and gender affects the figures.
- People who use British Sign Language (BSL).
- People who lipread.
- Deaf people and work.
- People with tinnitus.
- How to work out how many deaf and hard of hearing people there are in your area.

## **Measuring hearing loss and deafness**

Hearing loss and deafness is usually measured by finding the quietest sounds someone can hear using tones with different frequencies – which are heard as different *itches*. The person being tested is asked to respond – usually by pressing a button – when they can hear a tone and the level of the tone is adjusted until they can just hear it. This level is called the *threshold*.

Thresholds are measured in units called dBHL – dB stands for ‘decibels’ and HL stands for ‘hearing level’. Anyone with thresholds between 0 and 20 dBHL across all the frequencies is considered to have ‘normal’ hearing. The greater the threshold level is – in dBHL – the worse the hearing loss.

## **Definitions of deafness**

### **Mild deafness**

People with mild deafness have some difficulty following speech, mainly in noisy situations. The quietest sounds they can hear in their better ear average between 25 and 39 decibels.

### **Moderate deafness**

People with moderate deafness have difficulty in following speech without a hearing aid. The quietest sounds they can hear in their better ear average between 40 and 69 decibels.

### **Severe deafness**

People with severe deafness rely a lot on lipreading, even with a hearing aid. BSL may be their first or preferred language. The quietest sounds they can hear in their better ear average between 70 and 94 decibels.

## **Profound deafness**

People who are profoundly deaf communicate by lipreading. BSL may be their first or preferred language. The quietest sounds they can hear in their better ear average 95 decibels or more.

## **Where do we get information about deafness and tinnitus?**

Most of the facts and figures given in this factsheet are researched by the Medical Research Council (MRC) Institute of Hearing Research.

You can also contact organisations specialising in specific aspects of deafness and hearing loss for information. You will find them mentioned where appropriate in this factsheet.

All figures given in this factsheet apply to the UK unless otherwise specified.

## **Deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK**

There are estimated to be about 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK. The number is rising as the number of people over 60 increases. About 698,000 of these are severely or profoundly deaf. 450,000 severely or profoundly deaf people cannot hear well enough to use a voice telephone, even with equipment to make it louder. People who cannot use voice telephones might use textphones or videophones.

## **Deaf and hard of hearing children in the UK**

The following statistics have been supplied by NDCS. See *Further information* later for contact details

In the UK, there are about 20,000 children aged 0-15 years who are moderately to profoundly deaf. About 12,000 of these were born deaf.

Children who are born deaf are sometimes called ‘prelingually’ deaf because they were deaf before they developed language. They have particular educational needs.

There are more than 30,000 deaf children and young people.

About one in every 1,000 children are deaf at three years old. This rises to two in every 1,000 children aged nine to 16.

An estimated 840 children are born in the UK every year with significant deafness – moderate to profound deafness. Vaccination means fewer babies are born deaf as a result of their mothers having German measles (rubella) during pregnancy. This drop has been offset by more babies being born deaf from other causes such as premature birth or lack of oxygen during birth. More babies survive with multiple disability than used to be the case.

## **Deafened people**

The term ‘deafened’ describes people who were not prelingually deaf, but have become profoundly deaf in adult life. This often happens suddenly as a result of trauma, infection or ototoxic drugs – drugs that can cause hearing loss.

There are an estimated 123,000 deafened people in the UK aged 16 and over. They often rely heavily on lipreading and written communication. They may require communication support, such as speech-to-text reporters, lipspeakers or notetakers, in meetings and other situations where lipreading is difficult.

## **Deafblind people**

There are about 23,000 deafblind people in the UK. Some are totally deaf and totally blind – other deafblind people have some hearing and vision.

For information on deafblindness contact Sense (for contact details see Further information later).

## **Deaf people with additional disabilities**

A high proportion of severely or profoundly deaf people have other disabilities as well. Among those under 60, 45% have additional disabilities – these are more likely to be physical disabilities. Among severely or profoundly deaf people over 60 years, 77% have some additional disability. For 45%, this means significant dexterity or sight difficulties, or both.

## **Black and minority ethnic deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK**

There is evidence to suggest that some minority ethnic groups may experience higher levels of deafness. This is especially true of recent immigrants who have come from regions with greater levels of poverty, poor health care and low levels of immunisation against diseases such as rubella.

## **How age affects hearing**

Most of the 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK have developed a hearing loss as they get older. Only about 2% of young adults are deaf or hard of hearing. Around the age of 50 the proportion of deaf people begins to increase sharply and 55% of people over 60 are deaf or hard of hearing.

## **Are men and women equally likely to be affected?**

From the age of 40 onwards, a higher proportion of men than women become hard of hearing. This is probably because more men have been exposed to high levels of industrial noise. Among people over the age of 80, more women than men are deaf or hard of hearing. This is simply because women tend to live longer than men, not because women are more likely to become deaf.

## **How many people use hearing aids?**

About 2 million people in the UK have hearing aids, but only 1.4 million use them regularly. There are at least another 3 million people who do not have hearing aids but experience significant hearing difficulties in everyday life. They would be likely to benefit from hearing aids.

## **How many people use British Sign Language (BSL)?**

Many people who are born deaf or are deafened early in life use sign language to communicate. It is difficult to say how many people in the UK use BSL as their first or preferred language – current estimates suggest 50,000.

## **How many people lipread?**

It is difficult to say how many people lipread. Everyone lipreads to some extent, especially in noisy situations. When you speak to someone their facial movements will give you information to help you understand the meaning of what they are saying. If you have a hearing loss the balance between what you hear and what you see changes. As your hearing gets worse, you will get more information through lipreading. The biggest group of lipreaders is hard of hearing people.

## **Deaf people and work**

About 3.5 million people of working age – 16-65 years – are deaf or hard of hearing. 160,000 of these are severely or profoundly deaf.

Deaf and hard of hearing people are less likely to be in employment. Evidence from the *Labour Force Survey* (Autumn 2001) shows that 68.1% of people of working age who had 'difficulty in hearing' were in employment compared to 81.2% of people who are not disabled. See *Labour Market Trends* August 2002. You can download it free from [www.statistics.gov.uk/products/p550.asp](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/products/p550.asp) or get a copy from your local library.

In 1999 RNID carried out a survey into *The employment situation and experiences of deaf and hard of hearing people*. The survey found that respondents had an unemployment rate of 19% - four times the national average for people who are not disabled. Nearly a third of those deaf people who were in full-time work earned under £10,000 per year compared to 11.8% of the UK general population.

The full report is available from RNID Information Line, price £9.99 (see *Further information* later).

## **The register of deaf and hard of hearing people in England**

In England deaf and hard of hearing people can register with their local social services department. This is voluntary and many people do not register. People are entitled to help from their social services Department whether they are registered or not. This means the figures should be treated with a great deal of caution.

In 2001, only 194,840 people in England were registered with their social services department as deaf or hard of hearing. As there are more than 7 million deaf and hard of hearing people in England, and 577,000 of them are severely or profoundly deaf, it is clear that the registers are a very poor guide.

The figures are published by the Department of Health. The report is called *People Registered as Deaf or Hard of Hearing Year ending 31 March 2001, England*.

Visit [www.doh.gov.uk/public/deafandhardofhearing.htm](http://www.doh.gov.uk/public/deafandhardofhearing.htm) to get hold of a free copy.

## **Social services statistics Wales**

*Social Services Statistics Wales 2002* is available free on [www.wales.gov.uk/keypubstatisticsforwales/content/publication/publication.htm](http://www.wales.gov.uk/keypubstatisticsforwales/content/publication/publication.htm) It gives information about the number of people registered as deaf or hard of hearing in Wales. You will also find the *Welsh Health Survey 1998* available free on the same website.

## **People with tinnitus**

Tinnitus is the word for noises that some people hear 'in the ears' or 'in the head' – buzzing, ringing, hissing, and other sounds. Many people experience tinnitus at some time in their life, but for many it only lasts for a short time. For other people it is permanent. Permanent tinnitus can be either mild or severe.

- About 10% of adults – 4.7 million people – have experienced tinnitus for longer than five minutes. This figure does not include people who have had tinnitus for a short time after being exposed to a loud noise.
- About 5% of adults – 2.3 million people – have tinnitus, which they find severely or moderately annoying.

- About 5% of adults – 2.3 million people – have tinnitus, which makes it difficult for them to sleep.
- About 1% of adults – 470,000 people – have tinnitus that has a severe effect on their quality of life.
- About 0.5% of adults – 230,000 people – have tinnitus which has a severe effect on their ability to lead a normal life.
- 7% of adults – 3.3 million people – have been to see their doctor about tinnitus.

## **Working out how many deaf and hard of hearing people there are in your area**

The tables that follow show estimated numbers of deaf and hard of hearing people for the UK as a whole and for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. If you know the size of the population in your area, and how it breaks down by age group, you can use the percentages in the first table to calculate estimates for your area.

### **Estimated percentages of the UK population who are deaf or hard of hearing**

<b>UK</b>	<b>16-60 years</b>	<b>61-80 years</b>	<b>81+ years</b>
	%	%	%
Mild deafness	4.6	28.1	18.4
Moderate deafness	1.6	16.5	57.9
Severe deafness	0.2	1.9	13.2
Profound deafness	0.1	0.4	3.6
All degrees of deafness	6.6	46.9	93.2

## Estimated numbers of deaf and hard of hearing adults in the UK

<b>UK</b>	<b>16-60 years</b>	<b>Over 60 years</b>	<b>Total</b>
Mild/moderate deafness	2,366,000	5,891,000	8,257,000
Severe/profound deafness	108,000	580,000	688,000
All degrees of deafness	2,474,000	6,471,000	8,945,000

<b>England</b>	<b>16-60 years</b>	<b>Over 60 years</b>	<b>Total</b>
Mild/moderate deafness	1,981,000	4,930,000	6,911,000
Severe/profound deafness	90,000	487,000	577,000
All degrees of deafness	2,071,000	5,417,000	7,488,000

<b>Scotland</b>	<b>16-60 years</b>	<b>Over 60 years</b>	<b>Total</b>
Mild/moderate deafness	203,000	498,000	701,000
Severe/profound deafness	9,000	48,000	57,000
All degrees of deafness	212,000	546,000	758,000

<b>Wales</b>	<b>16-60 years</b>	<b>Over 60 years</b>	<b>Total</b>
Mild/moderate deafness	118,000	321,000	439,000
Severe/profound deafness	5,000	31,000	36,000
All degrees of deafness	123,000	352,000	475,000

<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>16-60 years</b>	<b>Over 60 years</b>	<b>Total</b>
Mild/moderate deafness	62,000	140,000	202,000
Severe/profound deafness	3,000	14,000	17,000
All degrees of deafness	65,000	154,000	219,000

## **Useful publications**

*Deaf children: Positive Practice Standards in Social Services.*

Association of Directors of Social Services, British Deaf Association, Local Government Association, National Children's Bureau, The National Deaf Children's Society and RNID. 2002.

Appendix 1 explores the incidence of deafness among minority ethnic groups.

*The employment situation and experiences of deaf and hard of hearing people.* RNID. May 2002.

*Hearing in adults,* A Davis. Whurr. 1995.

Chapter 8 gives estimates for every health region and local authority district of England and Wales.

*People Registered as Deaf or Hard of Hearing Year ending 31 March 2001, England.* Department of Health. October 2001.

*Risk factors for hearing disorders: epidemiologic evidence of change over time in the UK,* A Davis et al, in *The Journal of the American Academy of Audiology* 6:5. 1995.

## **Further information**

### **Medical Research Council (MRC) Institute of Hearing Research**

The Institute of Hearing Research is a unit of the UK Medical Research Council. It carries out research into hearing and hearing disorders

MRC Institute of Hearing Research, University Park,  
Nottingham NG7 2RD.

Tel: 0115 922 3431. Textphone: 0115 951 8509. Fax: 0115 951 8503

E-mail: [postmater@ihr.mrc.ac.uk](mailto:postmater@ihr.mrc.ac.uk) Website: [www.ihr.mrc.ac.uk](http://www.ihr.mrc.ac.uk)

### **The National Deaf Children's Society**

NDCS supports all deaf children, young deaf people and their families in overcoming the challenges of childhood deafness.

The National Deaf Children's Society, 15 Dufferin Street,  
London EC1Y 8UR.

Tel: 0808 800 8880. Textphone: 0808 800 8880. Fax 020 7251 5020.

E-mail: [helpline@ndcs.org.uk](mailto:helpline@ndcs.org.uk) Website: [www.ndcs.org.uk](http://www.ndcs.org.uk)

### **Office for National Statistics**

Contact the Office for National Statistics for lots of economic and social facts and figures.

The Library, Office for National Statistics, Cardiff Road,  
Newport NP10 8XG.

Tel: 0845 601 3034. Telephone enquiries in Welsh: 01633 813381.

Textphone: 01633 812399. (All telephone and textphone numbers are open Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm).

Fax: 01633 652747.

E-mail: [info@statistics.gov.uk](mailto:info@statistics.gov.uk) Website: [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)

## **Sense**

Sense is an organisation for people who are deafblind or have associated disabilities.

Sense, Head Office, 11-13 Clifton Terrace, London N4 3SR.

Tel: 020 7272 7774. Textphone: 0207 272 9648. Fax: 020 7272 6012.

E-mail: [enquiries@sense.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@sense.org.uk) Website: [www.sense.org.uk](http://www.sense.org.uk)

## **Further information from RNID**

The RNID Information Line offers a wide range of information on many aspects of deafness and hearing loss. You can contact us for further copies of this factsheet and the full range of RNID publications.

## **RNID Information Line**

RNID Information Line, 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL.

Tel: 0808 808 0123. Textphone: 0808 808 9000. Fax: 020 7296 8199.

E-mail: [informationline@rnid.org.uk](mailto:informationline@rnid.org.uk) Website: [www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)

Alternatively, fill in the *Want to know more?* order form at the end of this factsheet and return it to RNID.

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## **RNID Information, January 2003**

## Want to know more?

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### Please send me:

***Facts and figures on deafness and tinnitus***  audio tape  braille  large print

The RNID *Publications Catalogue*.

Information about RNID Typetalk and BT TextDirect.

Details of RNID communication services in my area.

RNID's fundraising leaflet. RNID relies heavily on donations from individuals, companies, trusts and fundraising events. Our leaflet shows how *you* can help.

Details on supporting RNID's future work with a legacy.

Information on how to take part in RNID campaigns.

A copy of the RNID Sound Advantage *Solutions* catalogue, giving details of equipment for deaf and hard of hearing people.

Other information – please tell us what you would like to know.

### **(Please write clearly, using block capitals)**

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**Are you?**

- At school or below school age
- A student
- Working age
- Retired

**How would you describe yourself?**

- Profoundly/severely deaf
- Hard of hearing
- Hearing
- Hearing aid user
- I have tinnitus
- I have balance problems

**If we could provide it, would you like to receive information in a different format? Please use number 1, 2 or 3 to show your preferred choice.**

- Videotape in British Sign Language (BSL) and with subtitles
- E-mail
- Face-to-face

**If we could provide it, would you like information in another language?**

- Yes. Please tell us which one.

**Please return this form to: RNID Information Line, 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL or order from our website at [www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)**