Patient information factsheet

Hearing loss terminology

There are lots of different words and phrases that people use when talking about hearing loss. This factsheet explains some of the most commonly used terms you may come across. You may choose to use some of these to describe yourself, or you may notice audiologists (hearing healthcare professionals) or doctors using them in conversation.

Some people feel very strongly that they prefer certain words to describe their hearing, and other people might use different words at different times. The most important thing is that you find the terminology that is right for you and let family, friends and healthcare professionals caring for you know how you like to describe yourself.

Hearing impaired or hearing loss

These terms are commonly used by audiologists and doctors to describe hearing levels that are outside of the normal range. These terms don't tell you anything about the degree of hearing difficulty, so your audiologist will use additional descriptive words, such as mild, moderate, severe and profound.

Some people like these terms, but others think they are negative. A person living with hearing differences may not want to be described as 'impaired', as they can achieve whatever they want to in life. Similarly, if a baby is born unable to hear, they haven't really 'lost' anything, as that is just how their ears have always been.

Hard of hearing

This term is a description of someone who has a hearing loss. It is generally used by people with mild to moderate hearing difficulties, which have come on during their adult life. Many people who use this term will use hearing aids.

deaf (with a lowercase 'd')

This term can be used to describe anyone with hearing levels outside of the normal range. Some people prefer this term as it avoids negative words, such as 'impaired'. However, some people think that it means you can't hear anything or can't communicate at all. This isn't true. Most people who describe themselves as deaf will use spoken language as their main communication method but may also use lip reading.

Deaf (with an uppercase 'D')

This term refers to someone who is part of the Deaf community. This usually includes people who have a severe or profound hearing loss and use British Sign Language (BSL). It might be that they have had a hearing loss since birth and BSL is their first language, or they may have come to learn about the Deaf community later in life.

Deaf people often feel a close connection with each other and enjoy spending time together in social activities like sports and clubs. When Deaf people feel proud of their deafness and see it as part of their culture and who they are, this is called having a 'Deaf identity'.

Here are a few good places to start if you would like more information about the Deaf community and what it means to have a Deaf identity:

- National Deaf Children's Society
  Website: **www.ndcs.org.uk**

- Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID)
  Website: **www.rnid.org.uk**

- BSL Zone – TV programmes for Deaf people of all ages made by Deaf people, in British Sign Language (BSL).

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Version 1. Published July 2026. Due for review July 2029. 4019