

Patient information factsheet

Sound sensitivities (hyperacusis) in children

We have written this factsheet to give you more information about sound sensitivities in children. It explains what sound sensitivities are and includes ways in which to support your child. We hope it will help to answer some of the questions you may have. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to a member of our team.

What are sound sensitivities?

Just like adults, children may be sensitive to certain sounds. For example, loud, irregular sounds such as hand dryers and vacuum cleaners. Some children may also find prolonged loud noises, such as at a concert, too much. This type of sensitivity to sound is common in children and usually disappears as they get older.

What is hyperacusis?

Hyperacusis is when common, everyday sounds seem much louder than they should. This hypersensitivity to sound can be uncomfortable or sometimes even painful. It can also affect one or both ears, and it can come on suddenly or develop over time.

Hyperacusis can be extremely distressing for some children and may trigger avoidance behaviours (any actions a person takes to escape from difficult thoughts and feelings), which can affect a child's general wellbeing and day-to-day life.

Who is affected by hyperacusis?

Hyperacusis can affect people of all ages, including adults, but it is most common in young children and people with additional needs, such as autism.

Children who suffer from glue ear may also experience hyperacusis. This is because their hearing levels are only temporarily reduced, so when their hearing improves, normal, everyday sounds can often seem much louder.

What signs should I look out for?

When confronted with loud noises, children with hyperacusis may:

- cry
- cover their ears with their hands
- panic, or become angry or distressed
- try to avoid the sounds, for example by leaving the room or turning off the television

How can I help my child manage their sound sensitivity?

- It is important to acknowledge your child's intolerance to certain sounds, but you should not focus on it or promote avoidance behaviours.
- Try to reassure your child by explaining the source of the sound that is distressing them.
- Comfort your child and take them away from the sound if necessary. It is good to get your child used to the sound, but if they are particularly distressed, forcing them to stay close to the sound will not necessarily be helpful.

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- Try to avoid giving your child ear plugs or ear defenders. Using earplugs can actually cause your child's ears to become more sensitive, as they get used to a reduced level of sound.
- Repeated gentle exposure to the noise may help reduce your child's reaction to it. For example you could record distressing sounds on your mobile phone and allow your child to control the volume themselves.
- Use warning words to prepare your child before a loud sound starts (where you can).
- Encourage your child to make sounds they have control of, such as clapping, banging a drum, playing with noisy toys, and turning on a vacuum cleaner themselves.
- Play some gentle background sounds or music to your child when in a quiet environment. This helps to increase the background volume, making sudden loud sounds less of a shock.

How can I help my child to relax?

Being able to help your child relax is important in managing the stress often associated with hyperacusis. It can help your child to reduce any physical anxiety response to hyperacusis. There are various relaxation techniques which you can try, including controlled breathing and muscle-relaxing exercises.

Breathing exercises

Encourage your child to take deep breaths in, hold and breathe out. Find a rate that is comfortable for your child.

Muscle-relaxing exercises

Get your child to stretch their arms above their head as tall as they can get (and on to their tiptoes if they can), and then flop down and let their body fold forwards. Repeat this a few times to help relax their muscles.

It is also important that your child is physically active every day and has a good sleep routine to help reduce anxiety.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us.

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Useful links

Cbeebies: tips for helping your child to keep calm

Website: www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/joinin/seven-techniques-for-helping-kids-keep-calm

Young minds

Website: youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-anxiety

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