

Unilateral Hearing Loss

A unilateral hearing loss affects only one ear. Because one ear still has normal hearing, most listening situations are not affected. Problems will occur with hearing sounds on the side of the poorer ear, locating a sound source, and understanding speech in background noise. A unilateral loss can be present at birth, or it may develop later in life. It may be hereditary, or it may be caused by problems during pregnancy or delivery. Among the causes are illnesses (such as meningitis and mumps) and serious ear infections.

The Center for Hearing Loss in Children at Boys Town National Research Hospital offers the following advice for school-age children with unilateral loss:

Many children with unilateral hearing loss do well in school and their performance remains unaffected by the loss. Recent studies suggest that 24-35% of children with unilateral hearing loss are at risk for failing a grade. These children may be distractible or have a limited attention span. They also may have problems following directions or show signs of fatigue as the school day progresses. Your child's teacher should be made aware of the hearing loss so that classroom performance can be closely monitored.

In the classroom, the child's "good" ear should be closest to the teacher or main sound source. This might mean changing seats for different classroom activities. Limiting background noise will make it easier for your child to hear and understand speech. Common noise sources in classrooms include air conditioners, fans, doors, other children, computer terminals, and pencil sharpeners. Any noise in a classroom is made worse by hard floors and walls. The child may benefit from a hearing aid if there is residual hearing, a CROS aid can be successfully fit, an FM system may be appropriate in the elementary years, or personal FM in middle school or high school.

A unilateral hearing loss makes it difficult to tell what direction sound is coming from. For this reason, it is important to teach your child to rely more on vision than on hearing in hazardous situations. Teach your child to look carefully both ways before crossing the street. Put rear-view mirrors on your child's bicycle to help him or her detect approaching vehicles.

In most cases of unilateral hearing loss, the better ear stays the same. It is important, however, to take precautions to protect your child's hearing. Here are three things you can do:

- Use earplugs to protect your child's hearing from very loud noises such as power tools, firecrackers, firearms, loud music, or snowmobiles.
- When your child has an ear infection, you should seek medical attention promptly. Your child's hearing can be affected by such problems.
- Have your child's hearing tested on a regular basis, as your physician and audiologist recommend. If you suspect any change in hearing, it is best to have your child retested immediately.

For more information: www.boystown.org