

## Sound Sensitivity in Children

### What is sound sensitivity?

Some children experience sensitivity to certain sounds, where they appear to find some sounds uncomfortable or upsetting. This is sometimes called hyperacusis. A more extreme fear of certain sounds is known as phonophobia. Often the sensitivity appears to sudden, loud sounds such as sirens, vacuum cleaners, motorbikes, fireworks, balloons popping, hair dryers and electric hand dryers.

About 15% of children experience hyperacusis at some point, compared to around 2% of adults. This is because as adults we are more able to understand the sounds and have developed strategies to help us cope. For example, adults may dislike the sound of a motorbike but understand the sound will eventually stop and is unlikely to hurt us. This means adults rarely panic or show signs of distress when the sound is present.

### What causes sound sensitivity?

Sound sensitivity is often a normal phase that children go through. Many young children find loud, sudden sounds scary, particularly if they don't fully understand why the sound has appeared. They may develop negative thoughts about the sounds which can heighten their reaction the next time they hear it, so they might cover their ears or cry. Most children will adapt as they learn to understand what the noise is, where it comes from and that it isn't anything dangerous. It is not uncommon for a child with additional sensory issues or complex needs to experience sound sensitivity.

Children who have had Glue ear are susceptible to sound sensitivity. This is because their hearing fluctuates so things can suddenly sound louder.

### What can I do to help my child?

- When your child becomes distressed by a sound be careful not to overreact as this may lead to a greater reaction in the future.
- Gently move your child away from the sound, if possible, then comfort and reassure them.
- Try to explain the source of the sound and address any concerns they may have.
- The fear reaction will often diminish if your child can exercise some control over the sound e.g. turning the sound on and off.
- Repeated gentle exposure to the trigger sound will help reduce your child's anxiety and sensitivity. You could record the trigger sound and listen to the recording at a low volume and gradually increase the volume over time.
- Listening to the disliked sound during relaxed play can help break the association between the sound and the negative fear response.
- Your child should not be forced to stay in a situation that causes obvious distress, as this may compound their apprehension and distress.
- Try practicing breathing exercises with your child, as this can help relieve anxiety and redirect their focus from the sound.
- The use of earplugs or ear defenders should be avoided except in extreme circumstances, or in the very short term. Exposure to normal tolerable sounds is crucial if the ears and brain are to develop normal sound sensitivity.

## Sources of information

<https://tinnitus.org.uk>

## Important information

This patient information is for guidance purposes only and is not provided to replace professional clinical advice from a qualified practitioner.

## Your comments

We are always interested to hear your views about our leaflets. If you have any comments, please contact the patient experience team on 0300 131 4784 or [esh-tr.patientexperience@nhs.net](mailto:esh-tr.patientexperience@nhs.net).

## Hand hygiene

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## Other formats

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After reading this information are there any questions you would like to ask? Please list below and ask your nurse or doctor.

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## Reference

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The Clinical Specialty/Unit that have agreed this patient information leaflet:

Diagnostic, Anaesthetic and Surgery - Paediatric Audiology

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