

Our friendly helpline team is waiting
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ACTION ON
HEARING
LOSS

Newborn hearing screening

THE FACTS

Newborn hearing screening

This factsheet is part of our **Ears and ear problems** range. You should read this factsheet if you're a parent, parent-to-be or carer of a newborn baby.

Read this factsheet to find out:

- Why should babies be screened for hearing loss?
- What is the newborn hearing screening programme (NHSP)?
- What information can I expect to receive?
- What happened before newborn screening was introduced?
- What is the role of screening?
- Why was newborn hearing screening introduced?
- Why is it important to screen so early?
- What will happen when my child is screened?
- What kind of support can I get if my baby has hearing loss?
- What is our view of newborn hearing screening?
- Where can I get further information?

If you would like this factsheet on audio tape, in Braille or in large print, please contact our helpline – see front page for contact details.

Why should babies be screened for hearing loss?

Every year in the UK, one or two babies in every thousand are born with a level of hearing loss in one or both ears that affects their understanding and development of spoken language. About half will have severe or profound loss of hearing. It's important to know that your baby has hearing loss as soon as possible so that you can give them the best possible chance to develop language and communication skills at the same rate as hearing children.

If your child's hearing loss goes undetected, it may slow down their social and educational development and is likely to go on to affect many areas of their progress.

What is the newborn hearing screening programme (NHSP)?

The newborn hearing screening programme screens newborn babies for deafness within the first few hours or days of their life. England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have programmes – see page 6 for details of their websites.

What information can I expect to receive?

You'll receive information about the newborn hearing screening procedure before and after your baby is born. You can also get a video about screening that has subtitles and is sign language interpreted: see page 6.

A hearing screening test cannot be done without your permission.

If you give birth in a hospital, and your area runs a hospital-based screening service, specially trained staff will probably test your baby as part of your maternity care before you go back home after the birth.

In some places, newborn hearing screening is done as part of a community screening service. This will happen when your baby is a few days old. It's usually done by your health visitor and may take place either in your own home or at a local clinic.

If your baby is born at home, or didn't have the test at birth, testing may be carried out at home, your local GP surgery or health clinic.

What happened before newborn screening was introduced?

Before newborn screening, babies had their hearing tested through an infant distraction test when they were seven or eight months old. The test was done by a health visitor, often at the baby clinic.

During the test, your baby sat on your lap while the health visitor stood behind you and made a series of noises and sounds using their voice and specialist equipment. Another member of staff monitored whether or not your child turned towards the sounds, showing that they had heard them. The test couldn't be done sooner because your baby needed to be able to sit up and turn their head to look at something interesting, to show that they had heard the test sounds.

What is the role of screening?

Screening tests are only done to identify those babies who may have hearing loss and should have further tests. Screening can highlight the need for further in-depth testing, which will give a clearer picture of your baby's hearing.

Whatever the results of tests done early in life, it's important that any signs of hearing loss that your baby shows later on are followed up and checked straight away. It's also

important that any concerns you have about your child's hearing are taken seriously and investigated properly. Occasionally, babies who are born with normal hearing can develop hearing loss later. If you have any concerns about your child's hearing, you should tell your GP or health visitor.

Why was newborn hearing screening introduced?

Research shows that children identified before six months of age, and whose parents or families receive high-quality information and support, are happier and do better than children whose hearing loss is identified later. So newborn hearing screening was introduced to check all children within the first few days of life. It is also more reliable than the infant distraction test.

As a result of screening, the average age when children are identified with hearing loss has fallen from 20 months to three months.

Why is it important to screen so early?

Of the roughly 800-900 children born with hearing loss each year in the UK, the infant distraction test used in the past failed to identify about 400 by the time they were 18 months old. Two hundred of these children had still not been identified by the time they were three and a half years old. This meant that their hearing loss was not detected before the critical early stages of their development.

Eight months is too late to start testing hearing. A more reliable test than the infant distraction test – and one that can be done earlier in a baby's life – had been needed for some time. If your child's hearing loss is undetected, they will not get the information they need to develop communication and language skills, and knowledge of the world at a critical stage in their development.

As soon as you know that your child has hearing loss you can take positive action to improve the range and quality of information they receive. It's now possible to make a very early start. Hearing aids can be fitted from two or three months old and families who want to can start using sign language earlier. You're also given more time to think about your options.

Parents of babies with hearing loss say it's helpful to know as early as possible – even when this knowledge brings challenges and difficult choices. Ninety per cent of babies with hearing loss are born in families with no history of deafness, so early support is important. These families often have no experience of hearing loss and therefore need access to reliable information and support.

What will happen when my child is screened?

Newborn hearing screening won't hurt your child. It can even be done as they sleep. The test measures the function of the cochlea (sense organ) in the inner ear. The person carrying out the test inserts a tiny probe just inside your baby's ear. The probe makes a small sound. If your baby's inner ear responds normally, the ear produces an 'echo' in response to the sound, and the probe picks this up. The test is very quick and gives results immediately. Both ears are checked.

If your baby's ear does not produce an echo, it does not mean that your baby has hearing loss. It just means that more tests are needed to confirm whether or not your baby's ear is responding normally. These further tests are equally simple and painless, but give more detailed information about your baby's hearing. Sometimes the echo can't be recorded due to a temporary blockage in the middle or outer ear, so the test may need to be repeated at a later date or a different type of test may be used.

If the echo can't be recorded, or your baby has been in the special care baby unit, a second test will be done – the automated auditory brainstem response (AABR). This test involves recording the brain activity in response to sounds that your baby hears through special headphones. There are small discs attached to your baby's head. Your baby will need to be asleep for this test, which usually takes about half an hour. It's safe, painless and the results will be available immediately.

If the second test does not produce a clear response from either ear or both ears your baby will be referred onto an audiology department. This does not necessarily mean that there is a hearing loss as this does often happen. They will be able to do more in depth tests; similar to those already recorded which will provide more information about your child's hearing.

What kind of support can I get if my baby has hearing loss?

You have a range of options and services as a family, partly depending on the level of your baby's hearing loss. The way you think about the different choices and what's best for your child may change over time. Whatever you decide, remember you'll be able to get support from a range of agencies from the time that your child is identified as having hearing loss:

- Your local paediatric audiology service will look into your baby's hearing loss and arrange for your baby to have hearing aids fitted if that's what you want.
- If your baby has very severe to profound hearing loss, they may be referred to a specialist cochlear implant centre for an assessment. This will determine whether they could benefit from a cochlear implant. There will be plenty of opportunities to discuss

what will be best for your child with the specialists. For more information, see our factsheet **Cochlear implants**.

- The National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) provides a range of information and can put you in touch with other parents in your area. Their booklet *Parenting a deaf child* is a good place to start – see next page for contact details.
- Your local education authority should provide information, practical advice and support through regular home visits from a qualified teacher of the deaf. They will be available to support you with information about your options and strategies, and put you in contact with other professionals.

Where can I get further information?

National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)

Supports deaf children and young people and their families.

15 Dufferin Street, London EC1Y 8UR

Tel/ textphone 0808 800 8880 Fax 0207 251 5020

helpline@ndcs.org.uk

www.ndcs.org.uk/family_support/0_to_4_years/index.html (you will need to register)

Newborn hearing screening programme websites

England: <http://hearing.screening.nhs.uk/> (includes BSL-interpreted video)

Wales: www.screeningservices.org.uk/nbhsw/

Scotland: www.healthscotland.com/topics/health/screening/pregnancynewborn.aspx

Early Support

A government programme that coordinates support for parents and carers of disabled children aged five and under, including deaf children.

www.direct.gov.uk/en/CaringForSomeone/CaringForADisabledChild/DG_10027494

Further information from Action on Hearing Loss

Our helpline offers a wide range of information on many aspects of hearing loss. You can contact us for further copies of this factsheet and our full range of factsheets and leaflets – see the cover page for contact details.

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