



## Patient Information on Sudden Sensorineural Hearing Loss (SSNHL)

### What is sudden sensorineural hearing loss?

Sudden sensorineural hearing loss is the sudden loss of hearing in the ear or the hearing nerve. It can occur over a period of hours, or up to three days. Many patients wake up with the hearing loss. The hearing loss usually occurs in one ear and can vary in severity. It is rare for both ears to be effected.

### Other symptoms which may accompany the sudden loss in hearing include:

- Distortion of sounds in the poorer hearing ear
- Tinnitus, which is the awareness of noises in the ears or head
- A blocked or full feeling in the ear (aural fullness)
- Imbalance or dizziness
- Nausea/vomiting.

The hearing loss may be temporary or permanent. It occurs most often in people aged 30 - 60 years old. Both males and females are equally affected.

Sensorineural hearing loss is caused by a loss of sensitivity of the cochlea (hearing organ), which is usually permanent. However, in cases of sudden sensorineural hearing loss there is a chance that hearing may partially or fully recover.

### What causes it?

There are many potential causes of sudden sensorineural hearing loss, such as viral or blood clots. However, in many cases, the specific cause of hearing loss remains unknown and patients have no other symptoms. Many patients are very young and healthy.

### Causes of sudden sensorineural hearing loss include:

- Idiopathic (unknown) – most common
- Viral infection of the cochlea
- Blood flow abnormalities of the cochlea
- Autoimmune disorders
- Metabolic causes
- Toxic causes (drugs that harm the ear as a side effect)
- Trauma or head injury
- In very rare cases, the sudden hearing loss may be caused by a growth on the auditory (hearing) nerve.



## **Will my hearing recover?**

Recovery of hearing can often depend on a number of factors. Prompt diagnosis and medical treatment provides the best chance of recovery. Some literature reports that in 50% of cases, hearing can spontaneously recover.

The outcomes are better if:

- The hearing loss is worse for low pitched sounds than high pitched sounds
- The hearing loss is considered to be mild or moderate in degree
- Treatment is received as rapidly as possible

Often, the greatest recovery in hearing will occur within two weeks following the incident, however, some patients may have an improvement over a 12 month period. Patients with a lesser degree of hearing loss often have a greater improvement in hearing than those with greater degrees of hearing loss. However it is not unheard of for patients with severe losses to make complete recoveries.

## **What can be done?**

### **Treatment**

Corticosteroids are commonly administered in cases where the cause of the sudden hearing loss is unknown. Steroids may significantly improve the recovery of hearing, by reducing inflammation and swelling of the cochlea. These are often in tablet form to begin with. Injections through the ear drum can also be used when tablets cannot be taken or when tablets have failed. Please talk to your specialist for details.

### **Long term outcomes**

In some cases of sudden sensorineural hearing loss, hearing may not recover. If this occurs, preservation of remaining hearing in both ears is important. Ways to prevent further hearing deterioration include limiting the amount of noise exposure, and using hearing protection when in noisy environments.

If hearing does not recover either spontaneously or with medical treatment, a hearing aid may be an option. Further information on hearing aids can be found on Dr Fiona Hill's website.

Tinnitus can also continue to be present, regardless of whether hearing recovers or not. Relaxation and distraction techniques can be of benefit to help reduce the perception of tinnitus. For further information on tinnitus and tinnitus management can be found on the patient information section of Dr Fiona Hill's website.



## **Concerns or questions?**

### **You can contact Dr Fiona Hill through the links on her website:**

- Website: [drfionahill.com.au](http://drfionahill.com.au)

Your GP is also the best contact for ongoing care and concerns.