



European Federation of Hard of Hearing People

AN INCLUSIVE SOCIETY

**Being accessible
to
hard of hearing people**

GUIDELINES

To be hard of hearing

“Hard of hearing people” is used as a definition to describe all groups of hard of hearing individuals, covering everybody with a hearing loss, ranging from light hearing loss to adult, profoundly deafened users. Contrary to deaf people, hard of hearing people develop and use the spoken language (with or without sign support).

Light hearing loss

People with a light hearing loss can often manage without a hearing aid, but they are dependent on adhering to certain rules of communication. Good acoustics, no background noise, good lighting and clear articulation by the interlocutor are all factors that contribute to better comprehension for this group.

In the modern society, there is a lot of noise, and hard of hearing people encounter more problems in daily life than they did 100 years ago. Traffic noise, background music in shopping centres and from household machines are examples of noise nuisance that make the understanding of speech difficult.

This group benefits in a similar degree from visual information and subtitling as hard of hearing people with a more severe hearing loss do.

Many, within this group, have a progressing hearing loss, but taking the step to start using hearing aids is often a large barrier for many of them. The longer they wait, however, the more problems they get, and the result is often job loss, failure in education and social isolation.

Therefore it is important for professionals and organisations to give society information about hearing loss and the problems and solutions connected with it.

Moderate to severe hearing loss

The most important support for this group is a good hearing aid. A hearing aid can also be used together with other listening devices such as an induction loop or desktop loop.

A hearing aid must always be customised to the individual’s level and profile of hearing loss, and the process of adjustment should be accompanied by training in how to use and how to maintain the hearing aid.

Other factors to take into consideration are the dexterity and mobility in fingers and hands as well as other health conditions. Older people very often have problems with hearing aids that are too small or too complicated.

In addition to their hearing aid, the same rules of communication as for those with a light hearing loss apply to this group, in particular the provision of visual information and subtitling.

Adult, profoundly deafened people

Adult deafened people we call those individuals who have lost almost all or nearly all hearing ability, but after they have developed spoken language.

Cochlear implants have proven to be a good solution for some, while others depend on micro-link or other listening devices connected to the hearing aid.

In many situations, the equipment does not provide a sufficient solution, and speech-to-text interpretation or use of supportive signs is needed.

Speech-to-text interpretation must always be offered at no cost to hard of hearing people themselves and in all situations needed. Examples are: in education, in meetings, during visits to local and national government offices, for medical visits or to attend the police station, and indeed for all other situations where good communication is important.

At home or with friends, supportive signing can be very helpful. Supportive signs must not be mistaken for deaf sign language. Sign supported languages are spoken languages of the land with signage supporting comprehension.

There should be training courses for family and friends, free of charge, available.

Adult deafened people are totally dependent on visual information and subtitling.

List of measures to make comprehension and communication better

- a well adjusted hearing aid, suitable for the person and his/hers hearing loss.
- good acoustics
- good lighting
- induction loops
- desktop loops
- equivalent visual information
- subtitling and captioning
- safety equipment with vibrating alarms and/or flashing (strobe) lights
- training courses for lip reading and sign support

Technical devices

Induction loop system

A loop system helps hard of hearing people who use a hearing aid or loop listener to hear sounds more clearly by reducing or cutting out background noise. At home, for example, you could use a loop to pick up sound from your television, hi-fi or radio. A loop can also be set up with a microphone to help hearing aid users hear conversations in noisy places. In the theatre, a loop can help you hear the show more clearly. A loop cannot be used to give stereo sound. If this is important, you should consider using an infrared system.

How induction loop systems work

An induction loop is a cable that circles the listening area. An electric current is fed to the loop by a loop amplifier. The amplifier gets its signal from a microphone placed in front of the person speaking or by means of a direct connection from another sound

source, such as a sound system. The resulting electric current in the loop produces a magnetic field, which corresponds to the sound. You can then pick up this magnetic field if you are sitting within the area of the loop and your hearing aid - or loop listening aid - is switched to 'T'. You will need to adjust your own hearing aid for volume.

Coverage

An important requirement for other rooms than cinemas is that the loop system should cover not only the area for the audience, but also the podium or any other area used by speakers/performers.

Desktop and counter loops

A desk loop is a small induction loop placed on or under the desk or at counter windows, covering a small area.

Desktop/counter loops are important for communication in ticket offices, at information desks, in hotels, banks, the post office, pharmacies and chemists, as well as other retailers, and make it possible for hard of hearing people to receive information privately and without misunderstandings.

This is of particular importance with regard to ticket offices and information desks at public transport terminals, where the acoustic environment often is very bad and affected by high levels of background noise and echo.

Infrared system

An infrared system is an alternative to a loop system. It consists of a transmitter and a listening receiver. Sound is fed to the transmitter in the same way as with the loop system, either by a direct electrical connection or via a microphone. It is then transmitted as invisible infrared light to where you are sitting.

How to use an infrared system

To hear sound, you need to use an infrared receiver:

- The under-chin 'stetoclip' type receiver is suitable for people who do not use a hearing aid. If you do use a hearing aid, you can still use this type of receiver, but you will need to remove your hearing aid first.
- A neck-loop receiver is used with a hearing aid. You need to set your hearing aid to 'T'. This type of receiver is suitable for people with a greater level of deafness or hearing loss.
- Infrared receivers are sometimes built into headphones, but make sure that you use ones designed for people who are hard of hearing.

All types of receiver are battery-operated and therefore give you complete freedom of movement. Infrared systems are less likely to have problems with interference or sound spilling over into other rooms. However, strong sunlight and dark wall coverings can reduce the quality of sound and area they can work in.

Several infrared systems can be used simultaneously in rooms next to each other and they are suitable for confidential meetings. They provide high quality sound. Stereo versions are available.

FM transmitter

A portable radio wave system with a microphone, transmitter and receiver can be used everywhere and gives people with a severe hearing loss the possibility to listen to guides in museums, speakers in rooms without induction loop, and by directing the microphone to people in a conversation it is easier to follow discussions and conversations.

Speech amplifier “Hear it”

“Hear it” is very helpful for older people who can not manage a hearing aid. It is easy to use and produces a very good amplification of the speech. It is also very easy to adjust, even with bad dexterity in hands and fingers.

The “Hear it” can be used with headphones or a neck loop and hearing aid.

Alerting/Alarm systems

There are 3 different alerting methods for hard of hearing people:

- Acoustic (strengthened signal)
- Optic signal (flashing light or strobe)
- Tactile (vibrating alarm to wear or to put under a pillow)

In homes, offices and other environments where hard of hearing people might be present, such accessible alerting systems must be connected to the smoke alarms, other detector based alarms, to the telephony ringing system, to the door bell and to any other system that requires alerting.

There exist also alarm clocks that use visual and/or tactile alerting to wake hard of hearing people up in the morning.

Suitable alerting systems that meet the needs of hard of hearing people are very important there where health and safety is a concern, for example to prevent hard of hearing people to be killed in hotel fires.

Telephones

Many hard of hearing people are still able to use voice telephones, but often only of the telephone provides suitable adjustment. Some of the important features for hard of hearing people using voice phones are:

- The ability to turn up the ring volume or change its pitch
- Extension bells that can alert you (if appropriate through extra loud ringing) in other rooms or when outside, in combination where required with visual and tactile alerters
- Built-in or external telephone amplifiers that makes incoming speech louder
- Captioned telephone services where incoming speech is also displayed as text on a screen
- Built-in inductive coupler to use with a hearing aid on the T-setting.

- Tone adjustment, allowing hard of hearing users to make the incoming audio clearer to them
- Phones with two handsets can be used when you want a lip speaker to listen in to the conversation and help interpret it

Mobile phones

Mobile phones are mostly used as voice phones, but all mobile phones and networks now also support the SMS short text message service. This can be useful for hard of hearing people wanting to communicate in text. In some countries, SMS messages can be sent to landline phones as well.

Mobile phones are smaller and so do not always offer the same degree of adjustment and adaptability as landline phones do. However, some mobiles offer better tone and volume adjustment than others and have also vibrating alerting built-in.

Some mobile phones can cause considerable interference when used near a hearing aid. In that case, using a neck-loop can help. These keep the mobile phone further away from the hearing aid and so reduce the chances of interference. They work with almost any hearing aid that has a 'T' setting.

Before purchasing a mobile phone, it is important to try it out in the shop and to make sure it has all the controls and adjustments needed and (if needed) that it works well with the users' hearing aid.

Internet Telephony/VoIP

More and more people are making and receiving calls over the Internet, using a technology called VoIP ('Voice over IP') or VoB ('Voice over broadband'). This can be done using either a software client on a computer, via a special VoIP telephone that connects directly to your broadband router/modem or plugs into a PC via a USB connector, or even via a normal telephone plugged into a special adapter.

Before subscribing to a VoIP/VoB package, users should try out the service and make sure it works well for them. Often, call quality can be as good or better than a normal landline or mobile, but not all software and hardware solutions provide full tone and volume adjustments, or suitable alerting tools. Also, with some VoIP services, it is not possible to make emergency (999) calls.

It should be noted that IP connections are not line powered via the exchange. In case of blackouts or other mains interruptions, no phone calls can be made. In future, this could be a serious disadvantage for elderly persons using alarm systems operating via the telephone network.

Text telephony

Not all hard of hearing people are able to use voice telephony. In many countries, some form of text telephony is available. Textphones and other real-time text solutions allow people to send and receive text in real-time. Analogue textphones therefore have a keyboard and a display screen.

However, to communicate in text, both parties in the call must have a textphone device. In some countries, there exist therefore text relay services. When using a text relay service to call a hearing person, a relay operator will join the line. The text user can type or speak their conversation to the hearing person, the hearing person will speak their part of the conversation and the relay operator will type exactly what is being said.

Traditional textphones are landline, fixed network devices. However, mobile telephony has dramatically changed the way in which people communicate. However, there are not many mobile textphones available. Only in a handful of countries, such as the UK, are there mobile textphones available to hard of hearing people who need real-time text.

Similarly, while Instant Messaging and chatting have become popular, mainstream text services used on the Internet, these services are not based on real-time text and often cannot be used to make text relay calls to voice phone users. Some solutions have been developed to bring real-time text to mobile and Internet devices (such as TalkByText).

However, urgent action is needed at a national, European and international level to ensure a universal technical solution is introduced to ensure that deaf, hard of hearing and speech impaired people are able to communicate through real-time character by character text (interactive text), between mobile phones, PSTN text phones, Internet Telephones and PCs. Interactive text will allow these people to have the same type of telephone experience that people using voice have.

It is essential that interactive text is brought into the mainstream and becomes a standard available communication service on mainstream telecom networks and terminals. Specialised (and stigmatised) “deaf-only” devices such as analogue textphones are expensive, non-interoperable, not user friendly, awkward things. Mobile and IP based networks should provide real-time text using the open industry standard for ToIP. Backward support of legacy PSTN Text telephones must be provided at the borders of the network using gateways that translate the interactive ToIP text stream to the analog text protocols such as V.21, DTMF, EDT, Minitel and Baudot and vice versa.

Other measures

Lighting

Good lighting makes it easier to lip read. It is therefore important that the speaker’s face is properly and uniformly illuminated. The best position in a room is usually the one where the hard of hearing person has his back towards the window so that the light from the window falls on the speaker’s face.

Also it is of great benefit if the lighting is adjustable so that the speaker’s face can be illuminated during projector shows and presentations.

Acoustics

The acoustic environment in buildings and other man-made surroundings is very important. For hard of hearing people, the main consideration in terms of acoustic

properties is to enable and support speech communication. This means that background noise is suppressed, while increasing the speech-intelligibility. Good acoustics also benefit microphone/loop systems and help people with milder hearing loss who don't use hearing aids or other technical devices. Background noise comes both from activities in the room (-s) as well as from the outside (such as traffic noise).

This requirement for good acoustic environment applies to all premises where people spend some time. Not only meeting rooms in offices, but equally so classrooms and lecture theatres in schools and the like, foyers and corridors; cafés and restaurants. Larger rooms like auditoriums for 100 people or more, should always be designed by an acoustic expert.

Special building materials and curtains can be used to reduce echo and make listening easier in meeting rooms. Equally important is the design of furniture and other interior fittings. For example: The moving of chairs on a hard surface often causes very disturbing noise. Softer floor materials and/or "muffling paws" can reduce this noise.

Visual information

Providing equivalent, visual information is of great importance in all cases where information is conveyed via a loudspeaker or public address system. The information can be provided on a monitor or another form of display or on an information board.

All public transport systems create noise that make listening difficult. In a noisy train station or a bus terminal, or in an airport, it is very important that it is possible to be able to read the information given out over the speaker system. This visual information must be equivalent in terms of both content and timing. There might be delays or other changes to a service, and not being able to understand the information creates an uncertainty and confusion that prevents many hard of hearing people from travelling or causes serious problems with missed or wrongly boarded connections.

All trains, trams, busses and metros should have visual information displays providing up-to-date details about platform, line, next stop, delays and emergency situations.

Subtitling

Television is the most important media for sport, entertainment, information and politics. Hard of hearing people should not be excluded from using this most pervasive and often important information medium. The arguments about costs and lack of technical solutions for live subtitling are often incorrect and ultimately not relevant, as the cost of exclusion has time and again been proven to be much larger than the cost of providing access services.

The live subtitling systems available today are mainly human operator based, using either a standard keyboard or high-speed input methods such as velotype or palantype. Some solutions use automatic speech recognition to assist the operators in generating the output.

The subtitling can either be in open format, where it is part of the main vision picture, or in closed format, where users can switch it on or off according to their preference and need.

An inclusive society - being accessible for hard of hearing people

Amongst the most important tasks for organisations of deaf and hard of hearing people, is raising awareness about the profile, needs, abilities and preferences of hard of hearing individuals in the modern world. This must focus not just on identifying and lowering existing barriers, but equally so on preventing new barriers to opportunity and fulfilment from being raised.

Accessibility and inclusion should be a key part of all societal planning, design, implementation and deployment.

All theatres, cinemas, concert halls and other public venues should have induction loops fitted as standard.

Meeting rooms in conference venues, at public

All parts of the public transport systems, from information and ticket offices to information provision during and after travel should be made fully accessible through visual information, induction loops and staff training.

Stations, terminals and airports should have areas and help points with induction loops fitted and visual displays for information provision in real-time.

All hotels should have accessible rooms with induction loops, communication facilities and alerting facilities suitable for hard of hearing people.

All ships carrying passengers should have accessible cabins with appropriate communication and alerting systems and information displays in all communal passenger areas onboard the ship.

All television programmes and films should be subtitled and equipment for both standard and high definition television should fully support closed subtitling

All telephone networks and services should support ToIP real-time text and have access to a text relay service, while maintaining connectivity to legacy analogue textphones.

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