

Newborn Hearing Screening

About this factsheet

This factsheet is part of RNID's **medical** range. It is written for parents and carers of newborn babies.

This factsheet looks at the hearing tests currently available for babies in the UK. It tells you:

- Why babies should be screened for deafness.
- About the introduction of Newborn Hearing Screening in the UK and why it is so important.
- Where Newborn Hearing Screening is available and what happens if you live in an area where it is not yet available.
- How Newborn Hearing Screening and The Health Visitor Distraction Test work.
- About support available if your baby is deaf.
- About RNID's policy on Newborn Hearing Screening.

At the end of this factsheet we give professionals and parents details of organisations to contact for further information.

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What is Newborn Hearing Screening?

Newborn Hearing Screening is the screening of newborn babies for deafness within the first few hours or days of life. It is also known as Universal Neonatal Hearing Screening (UNHS).

Why should babies be screened for deafness?

One or two babies in every thousand are born in the UK each year with a level of deafness significant enough to affect their understanding and development of spoken language. About half of these will be severely or profoundly deaf. It is important to know that your baby is deaf as soon as possible so that you can start to give them the best possible chance to develop language and communication skills at the same rate as hearing children.

If your child's deafness goes undetected this will slow down their development and is likely to go on to affect many areas of their progress.

The introduction of Newborn Hearing Screening

England

In June 2000, the Department of Health announced plans to introduce Newborn Hearing Screening in England. All newborn babies are now being screened in the following places:

- Avon
- Barnsley
- Bradford
- Buckinghamshire (Milton Keynes)
- Calderdale and Kirklees
- Camden and Islington
- Chesterfield

- East Sussex
- Manchester
- North Cheshire
- North Staffordshire
- Nottingham
- Northumberland
- Oxford
- Sheffield
- Shropshire
- Stockport
- Southampton
- Tower Hamlets
- Waltham Forest
- Wiltshire

Newborn Hearing Screening will be available soon in the following areas:

- Barnet, Enfield and Haringey
- Bedfordshire
- Bolton
- Bury, Rochdale, Heywood and Middleton
- Oldham
- Cambridgeshire
- Croydon
- Doncaster (Doncaster and Bassettlaw NHS Trust)
- Dudley
- East Riding & Hull
- Gloucestershire (Stroud and Cotswold)
- North and Mid Hampshire
- Portsmouth, South East Hampshire, Isle of Wight and West Sussex

- Redbridge
- Salford and Trafford
- South Wiltshire

Northern Ireland

The introduction of Newborn Hearing Screening in Belfast is planned.

Scotland

Newborn Hearing Screening is not yet available, but will soon be introduced in:

- Lothian
- Tayside

Wales

There are active plans to introduce Newborn Hearing Screening across Wales in 2003.

How will you know if Newborn Hearing Screening is available in your area?

If you are expecting a child and live in an area where Newborn Hearing Screening is already available, you will receive information about the screening procedure before your baby is born.

If you gave birth in a hospital your baby will probably be tested before you return home following the birth. If your baby is born at home, arrangements will be in place to make sure your child is screened.

What happens if you don't live in an area where Newborn Hearing Screening is available?

The Health Visitor Distraction Test

If you don't live in an area where Newborn Hearing Screening is currently available your baby will be tested using the Health Visitor Distraction Test. This test screens babies when they are seven or eight months old and has been in use for many years. During the test your baby sits on your lap while the health visitor stands behind your baby and makes a series of noises and sounds. Someone else monitors whether or not your child turns towards sounds they hear.

Targeted Newborn Hearing Screening

Hospitals in many areas already screen some babies if they are known to be at higher risk of deafness – for example, if there is a family history of deafness or if the baby has been in a Special Care Baby Unit for more than 48 hours. This kind of testing is called Targeted Newborn Hearing Screening.

The role of screening

Whatever the arrangements in your area, it is important to understand that screening does not confirm whether a child is deaf or not. It also does not provide information on the level or cause of deafness.

Screening tests are designed simply to identify children who should be investigated further.

Whatever test is being used, it is important that children who show signs of deafness are followed up and checked again promptly. It is also important that any family concern about hearing in the years following screening is taken seriously and investigated properly. Children who have normal hearing when they are born can become deaf later on.

Why is Newborn Hearing Screening being introduced?

Research has shown that the introduction of Newborn Hearing Screening will lower the average age when children are identified as being deaf, from 20 months to three months.

Newborn hearing screening checks all children within the first few days of life and compared with the Health Visitor Distraction Test, it is reliable. It is important that families know as soon as possible that their baby is deaf. Research shows that children who are identified before six months of age and whose families receive high quality information and support do significantly better than children whose deafness is identified later.

Why is it important to do the tests so early?

The Health Visitor Distraction Test fails to identify about 400 of the 840 deaf children born each year by the time they are 18 months old. 200 of these children will still not have been identified by the time they are three and a half years old. This means their deafness will not have been detected through the critical early stages of their development.

Babies of seven or eight months move about a lot and may be distracted by many things. A baby might be very deaf in one ear, but hear well in the other ear and the Health Visitor Distraction Test is unlikely to pick this up. This means that the test is not always reliable.

More importantly, eight months is too late to identify deafness. We have needed a more reliable test, and one that can be done earlier in a baby's life, for some time. If your child's deafness is undetected it means they will not get the information they need through hearing 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 is deaf you can take positive action to improve the range and quality of information they receive. It is now possible to make a very early start – hearing aids can be fitted from two or three months of age and families that want to use sign language can start earlier. Earlier identification also gives you more time to consider the options available to you.

Parents are the most important people in making sure that their children get off to a good start. Parents of deaf babies all say that it is helpful to know that their child is deaf as early as possible – even when this knowledge brings challenges and difficult choices with it.

What does Newborn Hearing Screening involve?

Newborn hearing screening is not painful or unpleasant for your child in any way. It can even be done as your baby sleeps. The test is based on the theory of otoacoustic emissions and measures the function of the inner ear – the cochlea – objectively. 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 cochlea responds normally, the ear produces a kind of 'echo' in response to the sound, and the probe picks this up. Both ears are checked.

If your baby's ear does not produce an 'echo', it does not mean that your baby is deaf - just that more tests are needed to confirm whether your child's ear is responding normally, or not.

If your baby is deaf

If tests have shown that your baby is deaf, there are a range of options and services available to you as a family. These options depend in part on the level of your baby's deafness and the way you think about these may change over time. Whatever you decide to do in the long term, it is important to know that you will be able to get support from a range of agencies from the time that your child is identified as deaf.

Your local paediatric audiology service will investigate your baby's deafness and arrange for your baby to have hearing aids fitted.

Your local education service should also provide information, practical advice and support through regular home visits from a teacher of the deaf. These services normally expect to contact families as soon as possible once they know their child is deaf.

The National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) provides information and can put you in touch with other parents of deaf children in your area. See the *Further information* section later for contact details.

RNID's policy on Newborn Hearing Screening

RNID believes that all newborn babies in the UK should be screened for deafness and that the programme to introduce Newborn Hearing Screening should be rolled out across the UK as quickly as possible. Currently the Health Visitor Distraction Test is being phased out as Newborn Hearing Screening is phased in. This means different screening procedures are in use in different places, which is unfair.

As more deaf babies are identified, it is important that services for families with children are developed. The development of information

and support services for children and families must go hand in hand with the introduction of Newborn Hearing Screening.

References

'A critical review of the role of Neonatal Hearing Screening in the detection of congenital hearing impairment', A Davis, J Bamford et al, *Health Technology Assessment*, Vol 1, No.10 (1997).

'Language of early-and-later identified children with hearing loss', C Yoshinaga-Itano et al, *Paediatrics*, 5: 161-1171 (1998).

Further information

The National Deaf Children's Society

NDCS supports all deaf children, young deaf people and their families in overcoming the challenges of childhood deafness.

The National Deaf Children's Society, 15 Dufferin Street,
London EC1Y 8UR.

Tel: 020 7250 0123. Textphone: 020 7250 0123. Fax 020 7251 5020.

E-mail: helpline@ndcs.org.uk Website: www.ndcs.org.uk

Department for Education and Skills

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) is taking action to develop the early support services available to very young deaf children and their families as Newborn Hearing Screening is introduced across England. In May 2002, the Department issued two sets of guidance for service providers:

- *Together from the Start – Practical guidance for professionals working with disabled children (birth to 2) and their families.*
- *Developing Early Intervention/Support Services for Deaf Children and their Families.*

Visit www.dfes.gov.uk to download these documents.

DfES has also announced an Early Support Pilot Programme to develop services in partnership with service users and service providers.

www.deafnessatbirth.org.uk

This website was developed in response to the introduction of Newborn Hearing Screening. It is designed to help teachers and other professionals work effectively with deaf babies and their families.

www.unhs.org.uk

This website gives information on the Newborn Hearing Screening programme in the UK.

Further information from RNID

The RNID Information Line offers a wide range of information on many aspects of deafness and hearing loss. You can contact us for further copies of this factsheet and the full range of RNID information factsheets and leaflets.

RNID Information Line

RNID Information Line, 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL.
Tel: 0808 808 0123. Textphone: 0808 808 9000. Fax: 020 7296 8199.
E-mail: informationline@rnid.org.uk Website: www.rnid.org.uk

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RNID Information, September 2002

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The RNID *Publications Catalogue*.

Information about RNID Typetalk and BT TextDirect.

Details of RNID communication services in my area.

RNID's fundraising leaflet. RNID relies heavily on donations from, individuals, companies, trusts and fundraising events. Our leaflet shows how *you* can help.

Information on how to take part in RNID campaigns.

A copy of the RNID Sound Advantage *Solutions* catalogue, giving details of equipment for deaf and hard of hearing people.

Other information – please tell us what you would like to know.

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Are you?

- At school or below school age
- A student
- Working age
- Retired

How would you describe yourself?

- Profoundly/severely deaf
- Hard of hearing
- Hearing
- Hearing aid user
- I have tinnitus
- I have balance problems

If we could provide it, would you like to receive information in a different format? Please use number 1,2, 3 or 4 to show your preferred choice.

- Printed information in British Sign Language (BSL) word order
- Videotape in BSL and with subtitles
- E-mail
- Face-to-face

If we could provide it, would you like information in another language?

- Yes. Please tell us which one.

Please return this form to: RNID Information Line, 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL or order from our website at www.rnid.org.uk