



# **Making Health Care Accessible for People With Hearing Loss**

*for doctors and other healthcare professionals*



# Introduction

Communication barriers are a major challenge in accessing health care for people with hearing loss. The good news is that there are many tactics that successfully address these barriers and most do not require additional funding to implement.

This brochure provides information and suggestions for enhancing communication and interaction with people who have hearing loss for professionals and staff working in health environments, including doctor and dental offices, hospitals, clinics and other health care settings.

The brochure is part of a Hearing Access Health Kit which also includes guidelines to help people with hearing loss communicate more effectively in a health care setting. The Kit includes items such as cards of the International Symbol of Access for Hearing Loss and containers for storing hearing aids. Documents are available on-line at [www.chha-bc.org](http://www.chha-bc.org); to request products, complete the online form. There is no charge for the Hearing Access Health Kit.

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CANADIAN HARD OF HEARING ASSOCIATION - BC CHAPTER



### What is Hearing Loss?

A person with hearing loss is not able to hear as well as someone with typical hearing, which is defined as hearing thresholds of 20 dB or better in both ears. Hearing loss may cause difficulty in understanding conversational speech or environmental sounds.<sup>1</sup>

People who identify as hard of hearing have a degree of loss ranging from mild to severe and usually communicate through spoken language. They usually benefit from the use of hearing aids, cochlear implants, and other hearing assistive devices, as well as from captioning. People who identify as deaf or Deaf usually have profound hearing loss, with little or no residual hearing, and frequently use sign language. How a person self-identifies is a personal choice, which is to be respected.

### What Can You Do?

Successful communication with people with hearing loss depends on a welcoming and accessible environment. If you are unsure about your clients' needs, ask how you can help and then be willing to help them understand at all phases of the health interactions.

#### Access to Appointments

- Train staff about clear communication with clients, whether on the phone or in-person.
- Many people cannot understand phone conversations. Allow clients to book by email rather than by phone. Use email or text reminders for appointments if possible.
- Use visual, rather than audible, means to alert the person of their turn to be seen, either with a wave or approaching them directly. Intercom or callouts are difficult to hear in a noisy waiting room.

#### During Appointments

- Identify the person as having hearing loss on their medical file.
- Discuss with the person their preferred means of communication (oral, written, or sign). If the appointment is by phone or online, ensure that the client is able to hear and understand you. If not, consider arranging for professional captioning through the Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility ([www.wavefrontcentre.ca/acs/](http://www.wavefrontcentre.ca/acs/)).
- Be receptive to a family member, friend or advocate accompanying the client to assist with communication. However, speak and defer to the client, rather than the companion.
- Enquire if the person has a completed Hearing Access Plan to provide to you. The form for it can be downloaded from [www.chha-bc.org](http://www.chha-bc.org).

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[www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/deafness-and-hearing-loss](http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/deafness-and-hearing-loss)



### During Medical Procedures or Hospitalization

- Check if medications being prescribed have adverse ototoxic effects on hearing.
- If the person is in hospital, place signage above the bed to indicate a hearing loss; use the International Symbol of Access for Hearing Loss as shown to the right.
- If the person needs a medical procedure requiring the removal of hearing aids, a cochlear implant processor or other medical devices, be sure that the devices are secured in a clearly marked container in a safe place.
- As noted under appointments, be receptive to a client being accompanied by a companion to assist with communication but speak directly to the client.



### Communication Tips

The following are important tips for better communication:

- Communicate in an area with low background noise. The light should be on your face, not behind your head.
- Get the person's attention before starting to speak.
- Face the person when speaking.
- Keep your face clear of barriers to speechreading.
- Speak clearly and at a moderate rate – do not over-enunciate or shout.
- Try to rephrase with different words when repeating a statement.
- Check back to ensure the client has understood the communication.
- Write your message if necessary.
- Consider using an assistive listening device.

### Technology Can Help

The adoption of communication tips is even more important when you are wearing a mask. Most people with hearing loss rely on reading lips and facial cues to supplement what they hear, which is diminished with the use of opaque masks. You may need to speak louder and more clearly than usual, to repeat yourself, or to use a pen and paper. However, even this may not be sufficient.

Where possible, use a clear mask. Other tools available to enhance communication are amplification devices such as a Pocket Talker or a loop system. Many facilities have installed such devices at the reception desk or other rooms involving client interactions. Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility lists clear masks and a range of devices on its website, available for purchase. Also recommended are that:

- The captioning feature should be activated on television sets in waiting rooms and other public areas.
- Telephones in hospital rooms should have volume control. Some people may require use of a TTY.

For further information on technology see the Hearing Access Health Kit at [www.chha-bc.org](http://www.chha-bc.org)



### Captioning and Interpreting Services

To ensure that no vital information is missed, you may also arrange for a captioner for a hard of hearing person who requires the service or a sign language interpreter if the person uses sign language. Captioning is provided by a trained professional who transcribes the spoken word into readable text. Services can be arranged through the Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility.

### Impact of the COVID Pandemic

During the COVID pandemic, much of the communication between healthcare providers and clients shifted to telephone and online meetings. For many people with hearing loss, these methods create communication barriers. Check with the client whether using the phone or an internet platform will work for them. If not, book remote captioning and interpreting services through the Wavefront Centre.

Note: Virtual platforms such as Zoom have the capacity to display captions by a professional captioner or through automated speech recognition. Since accuracy is crucial when discussing health issues, and to ensure that clients clearly understand the interactions, professional captioning is recommended.

### We are Here to Help

Please contact us for further information about how to make your health care practices and environment hearing accessible.



### **Canadian Hard of Hearing Association – British Columbia**

Formed in 1986, CHHA-BC is a consumer-based, non-profit, self-help organization which is part of a national network and includes local branches. CHHA-BC represents the interests of people with hearing loss and is engaged in awareness-raising, educational and advocacy activities.

**Website** [www.chha-bc.org](http://www.chha-bc.org)

**Email** [info@chha-bc.org](mailto:info@chha-bc.org)

**Voice – toll-free in BC** 1-866-888-2442

**Voice – local** 604-423-3247



### **Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility**

Established in 1956, Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility is a BC based, charitable not-for-profit organization operating as a social enterprise. Wavefront Centre delivers innovative services in Audiology and Communication Devices, Counselling, Seniors Outreach, and Accessible Communication Services that assist people who are Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing achieve full communication accessibility.

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