

Talking to the Hard-of-Hearing

The Administration on Aging website indicates that impaired hearing becomes increasingly common after age 50, affecting 23% of people aged 65-74; 33% of those aged 75-84; and 48% of those who are 85 and older. And these are considered conservative estimates. The follow tips are offered to assist you if you communicate with someone who is hard of hearing.

- Whenever possible, face the hard-of-hearing (*hoh*) person directly and on the same level.
- Your speech will be more easily understood when you are not eating, chewing, smoking, etc.
- Reduce background noises when carrying on conversations—turn off the radio or TV.
- Keep your hands away from your face while talking.
- If it's difficult for a person to understand you, find another way of saying the same thing, rather than repeating the original words. Move to a quieter location.
- Recognize that hard-of-hearing people hear and understand less well when they are tired or ill.
- Do not talk to a *hoh* person from another room. Be sure to get the attention of the person to whom you will speak before you start talking.
- If you are around a corner or you turn away, you become much harder to understand.
- Speak in a normal fashion without shouting or showing impatience. See that the light is not shining into the eyes of the *hoh* person.
- A woman's voice is often harder to hear than a man's, because of its pitch. A woman might try to lower the pitch of her voice when talking to the *hoh* to see if that helps.
- Speak slowly and clearly.
- If the *hoh* person wears a hearing aid, make sure that it has batteries installed, the batteries work, the hearing aid is turned "on" and that the hearing aid is clean and free from earwax.
- If the *hoh* person wears an aid, try raising the pitch of your voice just slightly. If the *hoh* listener is not wearing an aid, try lowering the pitch of your voice.
- If you know (or if it becomes evident) from which side the person hears best, talk to that side.
- Check to see that a light is not shining in the eyes of the *hoh* person. Change position so that you are not standing in front of a light source such as a window, which puts your face in a shadow or silhouette and makes it hard for the *hoh* person to *speech read*.
- It is better to speak directly face-to-face in situations where relatively diffuse lighting is adequate and lights the speaker's face. This allows the *hoh* listener to observe the speaker's facial expressions, as well as lip movements.
- Persons with hearing impairment can also benefit from seating themselves at a table where they can best see all parties (e.g. from the *end* of a rectangular table).
- Avoid abrupt changes of subject or interjecting small talk into your conversation, as *hoh* listeners often use context to understand what you are saying.
- Announce beforehand when you are going to change the subject of conversation. Doing so might avoid an unfortunate *faux pas* by the *hoh* listener.
- Sometimes *hoh* persons have "good" or "better" sides—right or left—ask them if they do. If they indicate a preference, direct your remarks to the *good* side or face-to-face, as they wish.
- If all else fails, rephrase your remarks or have someone whose voice is familiar to the *hoh* person repeat your words.
- Don't talk too fast.
- Pronounce words clearly. If the hearing-impaired person has difficulty with letters and numbers, say, "M as in Mary," "2 as in twins," "B as in Boy," and say each number separately, like *five*, *six* instead of *fifty-six*. The reason for doing so is that m, n, 2, 3, 56, 66 and b, c, d, e, t, and v sound alike.
- Keep a note pad handy, and write your words out and show them to the *hoh* person if you have to—just don't walk away leaving the hearing-impaired listener puzzling over what you said and thinking you don't care.
- And finally, **be patient**.