

What to do....

If you are having problems understanding speech you should:

- √ Contact an audiologist for a complete hearing test. She or he will find out whether you have a hearing loss and if so, whether it is likely to explain your difficulties understanding speech.
- √ If you have a hearing loss, get a hearing aid. A hearing aid will improve the information being sent from your ears to your brain. This will make it easier to understand speech.
- √ Learn some listening strategies and some ways to improve your listening environment. *The NCRAR has another brochure about this.*

The good news....

New research shows that our brains are more flexible than we thought – even as we get older. So it is quite possible to “teach an old dog new tricks” after all! In this case, the new tricks should be learning how to use your lifetime of experiences and incorporate new strategies for understanding speech.



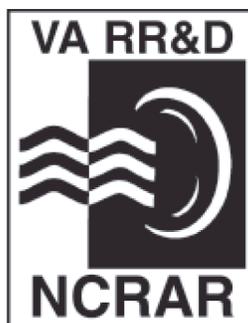
Other resources:

Hearing Loss Association of America:
www.hearingloss.org

Better Hearing Institute:
www.betterhearing.org

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association: www.asha.org/public/

National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders:
www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/hearing

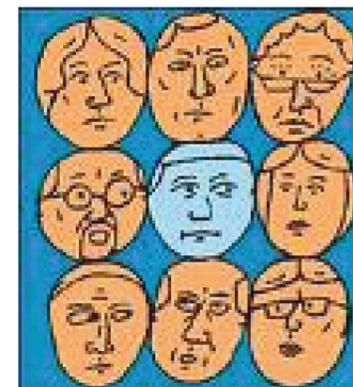


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Why Can't I Understand Speech?

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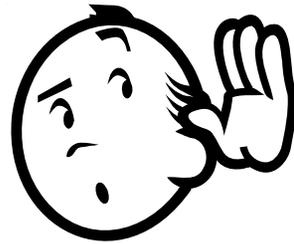
Most people blame difficulties understanding speech on their hearing. But ears and hearing loss are not the only reason for difficulties. The brain also plays an important part. This is because sounds are sent from our ears to our brain. As we age, the pathway between the ear and the brain also ages. This affects how well we can process the speech we hear.

The way we process speech can be compared to eating. Food enters the mouth, where it is broken down into smaller parts so that our digestive tract can make it useful to the body. Speech enters the ear, where it is broken down into the individual sounds that make up words. This information is then sent along nerves to the brain, where it is analyzed and understood. If we have any blockage or problems between the ear and the brain, we will have problems understanding speech.



Difficulty hearing....

Hearing loss does affect how well we can understand speech, because if we can't



hear something, our brain won't be able to process it. Speech sounds vary in pitch and loudness. Consonants are generally higher in

pitch and are less loud than vowels. Consonants like "s," "sh" and "th" are particularly high pitched and quiet. Consonants like "m," "b" and "d" are lower pitched and louder. Vowels are lowest pitched and loudest of all. Hearing loss caused by aging or by loud noise affects the high pitches more than the low pitches. When you have a high-pitch hearing loss, it is more difficult to hear sounds like "s," "sh" and "th" than it is to hear vowel sounds, and consonants like "m," "b" and "d."

Difficulty understanding....

People with a high-pitch hearing loss often confuse things. The sentence "What kind is it?" might sound like "What time is it?" because the consonants "t" and "k" aren't heard correctly. This is why people with hearing loss often complain that others are mumbling. The problem is worse in noisy places, because the noise covers over the quieter consonants.

Difficulty processing....

People with hearing loss, particularly older people with hearing loss, often complain that "everyone talks too fast." This is because the brain works less quickly as we age. To understand speech, our brain has to process it as it arrives. If sounds are reaching the brain more quickly than the brain can process them, the speech will sound jumbled.



This can be a particular problem when listening to the TV, radio or lectures, but is also a problem when talking with family and friends. People are pretty good at speaking more loudly but they usually find it difficult to speak more slowly.

When you have a hearing loss, the processing problem is made worse because the information sent from your ears to your brain is "damaged" to begin with.

