Hyperacusis

Information for patients, relatives and carers

Audiology Department

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What is Hyperacusis?

Hyperacusis is a term used to describe an acute sensitivity to noise. Even everyday sounds, which most people don't find intrusive, cause discomfort or pain. Many patients describe these everyday sounds as too loud. This can make concentration difficult and bring on anxiety. Some people withdraw from everyday activities which can exacerbate the condition.

Other forms of intolerance to sound are:

- Misophonia: a strong dislike to certain sounds causing an angry response.

- Phonophobia: an anxiety disorder caused by a fear of noise.
What Causes Hyperacusis?

In some cases, exposure to loud noises such as fireworks or a balloon popping can trigger hyperacusis. This can result in an anticipation of fear of loud sounds and an avoidance of certain situations such as parties. For others it can be a life event that causes anxiety. Hyperacusis is linked to increased sensitivity in the hearing pathway to the brain (Auditory System) which can be influenced by anxiety. Other possible causes are head injury, noise induced trauma, toxins from medication or viral infections. There are many people who never find the reason.

Conditions associated with Hyperacusis

Hyperacusis can occur on its own or with other conditions such as depression, migraine, Meniere’s disease, chronic fatigue syndrome and visual over-sensitivity.

It is more common with certain syndromes and conditions, such as:

- Williams’s syndrome,
- Autism,
- Attention deficit disorder,
- Auditory processing disorder,
- Learning difficulties.

Please ask your clinician if you have any questions.
When we feel frightened, anxious, annoyed, excited or happy, our body secretes adrenaline into our bloodstream. Adrenaline is a hormone which affects our body in many ways. It increases our heart rate, making the heart beat more strongly as well as enhancing our senses, particularly sight, touch and hearing. This can affect our reaction to sound and lead to avoidance behaviour. If our feelings toward the source of the sound are also affected, it reinforces the cycle.

The distress caused by hyperacusis increases peoples' sensitivity to sound by allowing more adrenaline to be released in the body. Thus a spiral of permanent anxiety leading to permanent excessive adrenaline stimulation is created which increases the hyperacusis.

This cycle has to be broken for us to make hyperacusis more manageable. By breaking the cycle, we reduce the amount of adrenaline that our body makes and this will have the effect of reducing the range of our senses from “heightened” to a more “normal” level. This, in turn, will bring the perceived sound level down to a more manageable level.
How can I manage Hyperacusis?

Many people with hyperacusis cut themselves off from sound, trying to avoid the source of their sensitivity. It is generally thought that it is important to slowly and gently reintroduce sound into the person’s life so that they can start to resume the activities they have been avoiding. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and mindfulness meditation can help in the management of hyperacusis. CBT examines the links between thoughts and emotions and their impact on our behaviour. It focuses on dealing with the feelings associated with sound sensitivity and moving towards accepting the sounds and reducing the stress surrounding them.
Ear protection

One common feature of people with altered sound tolerance is that they try and avoid loud sounds. Although this may seem like a common sense precaution, it can turn out to be counterproductive and can even exacerbate the condition. As people avoid sound, their environment becomes quieter and the auditory system becomes confused by this lack of sound input. The auditory system therefore becomes more sensitive in a misguided attempt to find the missing sound. This increased sensitivity can make the hyperacusis even worse.

It is sensible to use ear protection measures when doing something really noisy such as using DIY tools. However, it is inappropriate to use ear plugs or ear muffs when doing something that is not really noisy such as emptying a dishwasher or driving a car. Someone who has become used to wearing ear protection at inappropriate times should consult their therapist about measures for weaning them off this practice. For advice on appropriate ear protection measures, see the British Tinnitus Association (BTA) leaflet, “Noise and the Ear”. It is available on their website at: www.tinnitus.org.uk/noise-and-the-ear
Relaxation

Being able to relax is important in managing the stress often associated with hyperacusis. As people usually lead very busy lives, it can be difficult to take time out to concentrate on relaxation, but it does help to get any physical anxiety response to hyperacusis, which you may be experiencing, back under control.

There are various techniques which can be taught including controlled breathing and muscle relaxing exercises.
Where can I obtain further information?

**The Hyperacusis Network** (www.hyperacusis.net) is an invaluable resource, with much useful and up to date information, lively forums and the opportunity to purchase sound therapy CDs for hyperacusis.

**British Tinnitus Association Helpline**: 0800 018 0527  
www.tinnitus.org.uk

**References**

Living with Tinnitus and Hyperacusis; (2010) McKenna, L. Baguley, D. McFerran, D. p108
Tell us what you think of this leaflet

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact: Georgina Liddle, Senior Audiologist, Audiology Department, The York Hospital, Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE, telephone 01904 726741 or email georgina.liddle@york.nhs.uk.

Teaching, Training and Research

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of health and healthcare in our community. Healthcare students may observe consultations for this purpose. You can opt out if you do not want students to observe. We may also ask you if you would like to be involved in our research.

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PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email pals@york.nhs.uk.

An answer phone is available out of hours.
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