

mor pressing on the hearing nerve, an infection, or the body's own immune system attacking the inner ear. Certain antibiotics and anti-cancer drugs can also damage hair cells.

● **Reduce exposure to noise.** Teach children to stay away from loud noises. Be a role model and turn down the music volume. Buy power tools that have sound controls.

● **Protect your hearing.** Use ear-muffs or earplugs when you are exposed to noise. These devices—sold in drugstores, hardware stores and on the Internet—decrease the intensity of sound that reaches your eardrum. When properly fitted, they can reduce noise by 15 to 30 dB. Stuffing your ears with cotton balls simply won't do. They reduce noise only minimally. Employers, by the way, must offer free earplugs and earmuffs to employees exposed to noise at the work place.

● **See an audiologist if you feel you have a problem.** You'll be given a set of hearing tests to measure your degree of hearing loss.

● **Try hearing aids.** Hearing aids amplify sounds and are for people with high-frequency hearing loss. They need to be fitted by professionals. Used correctly, they can be very helpful.

Other solutions may be coming. Researchers are trying to grow new hair cells by looking at the process in sharks and chickens (whose hair cells can regenerate) and by using mouse stem cells. Others are trying to create artificial hair cells. Several drugs, such as vitamin E derivatives and certain anti-oxidants, are being investigated for their ability to protect hearing. The future could mean popping a pill to safeguard your hearing as you get ready to mow the lawn or head out to a rock concert.

In the meantime, take all those warnings to avoid loud noises seriously. Hearing matters more than we may realize until it's gone. "The best strategy," says Dr. Whitelaw, "is to keep the hearing you have."

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How Can You Tell If Your Baby's Hearing Is Normal?

Hearing problems in very young children may not become obvious until they are between 12 and 18 months, when they should begin to say their first words. Signs of hearing loss in infants may be very subtle and not so easy to notice. That's because young kids may mask their hearing issues by using other senses, such as touch and sight, to interact with the world around them.

But you can look for clues. According to the American Academy of Audiology, an infant with normal hearing should be able to:



Around 2 months:

- startle to loud noise (such as a cough, a bark or a hand-clap)
- calm down, even for a few seconds, when a familiar voice is heard (such as the mother's voice)

Around 4 months:

- look for the source of sounds
- start babbling, squealing and chuckling

Around 6 months:

- turn his or her head toward loud sound
- begin to imitate speech sounds
- babble (dada, baba, gaga) at least four different sounds
- enjoy ringing bells or noisemakers

Around 9 months:

- imitate speech sounds
- understand "bye-bye", or "no"
- turn the head toward soft sounds or the calling of his or her name

Around 12 months:

- correctly use "mama" or "dada"
- follow easy commands
- respond to music or singing

If your child is not meeting any of these milestones, he/she should be checked for hearing problems by a physician.

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