

INFORMATION SHEET – WHAT IS HYPERACUSIS

Introduction

Hyperacusis is common in autistic individuals. Audiologists have professional expertise in assessment, diagnosis and management of hyperacusis.

What is hyperacusis?

Hyperacusis is a condition in which a child experiences distress and pain in response to certain sounds which tend to be everyday sounds and which may or may not appear loud to a person who does not experience hyperacusis.

Some children struggle with noises in school. Everyone's experience of hyperacusis is unique but common symptoms include distress, anxiety, agitation and avoidance of distressing sounds which is upsetting, distracting and adversely affects the ability to concentrate. In particular, anxiety can exacerbate the effects of hyperacusis.

Understanding hyperacusis

- Hyperacusis is an impairment in the perception and processing of certain sounds.
- Hyperacusis cannot be measured or recorded independently.
- Hyperacusis is a real condition which can impact daily life.
- A child with hyperacusis may tolerate certain sounds that are loud but have real difficulty and distress with other, often quieter, sounds.
- A child experiencing Hyperacusis may develop anxiety in anticipation of the sounds they find distressing. This anxiety can cause an increased sensitivity to the way they perceive the sound.
- Sometimes increased anxiety surrounding sounds can lead to avoidance behaviours, with adverse impact on everyday life.

How can you help a child who has been diagnosed with Hyperacusis?

Hyperacusis requires a formal diagnosis usually available for your child through your local Audiology services.

If a child is diagnosed with hyperacusis, an audiologist is likely to follow a number of rehabilitation strategies that mitigate the effects of hyperacusis, as follows:

Behavioural Management: A therapy that addresses raised anxiety and sound avoidance and aims to reduce hearing sensitivity. The principles of behavioural management are:

- Providing comfort and reassurance to the child when they exhibit distress to sounds.
- Explaining the sound source to the child, making it clear why it makes its specific sound.
- Providing ways for the child to exercise some control over the sounds, perhaps by making the sound themselves or by finding ways to demystify the sound source, possibly using play.
- Gently repeating the sound to desensitise the child.
- Creating a 'safe space' where the child can retreat from a distressing noise that the child can access without needing specific permission.

Recalibration strategies: Is an approach in which continuous sound is played at a low level to a child in an attempt to recalibrate the ear's sensitivity and its processing of the sound. This type of treatment will be prescribed by an audiologist and may include any or all of the following:

- An App downloaded to a phone or tablet.
- A night-time 'sound enrichment' device
- Using an ear level device

Using ear defenders or headphones?

Use of ear defenders is counterproductive to most audiology treatment plans. Continuous use of ear defenders causes an increase in a child's auditory gain which heightens sensitivity to sounds. Children being treated for Hyperacusis should therefore avoid using ear defenders.