AIMS For a better birth...

Pregnancy and hearing: Did you know?

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Image source

By Alex Smith

- Did you know that one in three pregnant women develop tinnitus compared with one in ten who are not pregnant? Tinnitus is the sensation of buzzing, ringing or whooshing noises in the ear. It may be a sign of high blood pressure and possibly an early sign of pre-eclampsia, but it may also simply be due to the effect of the physical changes of pregnancy.
- Did you know that pregnancy can trigger or worsen hearing loss? This is surprisingly common with one small study in India seeing it in almost 5% of the 379 pregnant women who attended their hospital that year.[1] There are different reasons for hearing loss with most being temporary but some being permanent. It usually occurs in the second or third trimester or even after the birth, and can be unilateral or bilateral, conductive or sensorineural[2] Sudden sensorineural hearing loss (SSNHL) is relatively rare but is considered to be a medical emergency. Apparently the incidence of this has increased with rates varying between 2.7 in 100,000 in Taiwan, 27 in 100,000 in America and 160 in 100,000 in Germany[3] When I asked on a Facebook group for deaf and hard of hearing people about people's experience of maternity care, three of the small group who replied had experienced a deterioration in their hearing, with two saying that no one could tell them why.
- Did you know that Deaf and hard of hearing women are often asked to remove their glasses and

hearing aids when they go for a caesarean. Two responders from my Facebook question experienced this. One woman wrote:

"Had my emergency C-section four years ago and they made me take off my glasses and hearing aids. I felt so helpless."

"So four years later I had an elective C-section and strongly requested for my glasses and hearing aids to be kept in and they agreed. I felt so much more comfortable."

There is a rationale for removing these aids, but clearly it is also possible to accommodate them, so why not anticipate that a Deaf woman may want to see and hear her baby's first cry.

- Did you know that the antibiotic gentamicin can cause deafness in susceptible babies? It is commonly used to treat premature babies and for a long time it was assumed that the subsequent deafness was caused by the prematurity rather than by the medication. These drugs are often given while awaiting a confirmation of infection and may not even have been required. A new rapid test is available so that vulnerable babies can be identified before starting treatment.
- Did you know that Deaf people are twice as likely to experience trauma in their lives as hearing people? In this very interesting study from the States,[4] Deaf participants reported similar trauma experiences to the hearing population but the details of those experiences were different. For example, both deaf and hearing people may find themselves in an abusive relationship, but deaf people are more likely to remain in one if their partner is the only person they can communicate with. The ability to communicate seems to override safety. This is reflected in the fact that many deaf people will avoid seeking medical care because their communication needs are not met. In addition, deaf people are constantly subjected to audism and linguisticism,[5] which are forms of oppression-based trauma. Common themes found to be protective in relation to resilience in these situations included: individual assets, identity development, access to language and communication, access to information, and supportive networks. As over 90% of deaf babies are born to hearing parents, it seems that the very least the Government could do would be to provide excellent quality, accessible and free BSL classes for the new parents - ideally taught by someone who is also deaf who could then be a bridge between the family and the support of the Deaf community, and also be a positive role model for the child. This would pay dividends in the long term.
- Did you know that, *as far as I know*, there are no Deaf doulas in the UK; none that use BSL as a first language and offer support to Deaf families. In the States they have the wonderful Hand Waves Birth Services. This video shows the difference it can make to have someone with you who speaks your language.



Image source

Author Bio: Alex Smith is a long-time childbirth educator, editor of the AIMS journal, and the grandmother of a profoundly deaf grandson.

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[1] Swain SK, Pati BK, Mohanty JN. Otological manifestations in pregnant women - A study at a tertiary care hospital of eastern India. J Otol. 2020 Sep;15(3):103-106. doi: 10.1016/j.joto.2019.11.003. Epub 2019 Nov 22. Erratum in: J Otol. 2020 Dec;15(4):179. doi: 10.1016/j.joto.2020.09.006. PMID: 32884561; PMCID: PMC7452357.

[2] Editor's note: Sensorineural hearing loss results from damage to the hair cells within the inner ear, the auditory nerve, or the brain's central processing centres. Conductive hearing loss results from the inability of sound waves to reach the inner ear.

[3] Xie S, Wu X. Clinical management and progress in sudden sensorineural hearing loss during pregnancy. Journal of International Medical Research. 2020;48(2). doi:10.1177/0300060519870718

[4] Paige Johnson, Stephanie Cawthon, Bentley Fink, Erica Wendel, Sarah Schoffstall, Trauma and Resilience Among Deaf Individuals, *The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, Volume 23, Issue 4, October 2018, Pages 317–330, https://doi.org/10.1093/deafed/eny024

[5] Editor's note: Audism is the belief that being deaf is a physical flaw that needs to be repaired in order to live a full and rewarding life. Linguisticism is the superior regard of one cultural language over the other, for example, English over Sign Language.