

What Does Noise-Induced Hearing Loss Sound Like?

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The best way I can explain what it's like to lose hearing due to noise exposure is to give you a noise-induced hearing loss – no worries, we'll just make it temporary.

The part of the ear most susceptible to damage from loud noise is the high-frequency range – 3000, 4000, 6000 Hz. When you lose hearing in the high frequencies, you no longer hear many of the consonant sounds of speech – S, T, K, CH, F, TH, SH, P ...

I'll slowly take away these sounds from my speech.

First, the S, SH and CH.

“At first, the change will be very hard to notice. You may notice certain words are harder to understand, but you can fill in what's missing from the context of the conversation.”

Now, I'll take away the T and TH.

“Gradually, the words are harder to understand, especially if there's any background noise. Many workers with a high-frequency hearing loss still understand when they can hear a speaker's voice. But if they can't hear the speaker's voice, or if there's any background noise, they're lost. They don't understand the joke, they don't understand the instructions, they just don't understand.”

Now I'll take away the K and F.

“Now my speech may be very difficult to understand. You have a severe high-frequency hearing loss, but I've given you what I was going to do. Imagine what it's like for the noise-exposed person who slowly experiences this loss of hearing, not over the course of two minutes, but two or ten or twenty years. And nobody warned him it was coming. That person can very literally wake up one morning and realize his hearing has slowly deteriorated, and there is nothing ... nothing he can do to get it back!”

You have experienced a severe high-frequency hearing loss, but I've given it to you in just two minutes, and I warned you what I was going to do. Imagine what it's like for the noise-exposed person who slowly experiences this loss of hearing, not over the course of two minutes, but two or ten or twenty years. And nobody warned him it was coming. That person can very literally wake up one morning and realize his hearing has slowly deteriorated, and there is nothing ... nothing he can do to get it back!