

Hear the world

Acute hearing loss - when the ear suddenly no longer functions

Acute hearing loss is a symptom, not a diagnosis. This rather surprising definition, taken from an ENT manual, is intended to describe a medical condition but actually merely highlights the fact that we are treading unknown territory. An unfortunate situation considering the fact that there are around 250,000 cases of acute hearing loss in Germany each year. While the condition occurs most often among the 50–60 year-olds, the percentage of those in the 30–40 year age bracket is constantly on the up.

Those affected often experience a sudden acute deficiency (it usually only affects one ear but can lead to permanent loss of hearing) in the form of a sense of pressure, as if their ear was blocked by a piece of cotton wool. Others get the impression that their ear has somehow closed. In most cases, acute hearing loss is accompanied by tinnitus, in other words, you hear sounds in your ear that resemble a high-pitched whistle, or ring, or hiss, or hum, etc. Although this form of hearing loss, occurring completely out of the blue, is a condition affecting a growing number of people, its causes are as yet unknown. Acute hearing loss can probably be attributed to the interaction of physical and psychological factors that combine to place the organism under undue pressure, something often subsumed today under headings such as "stress" or "burnout syndrome".

Paying the price for overstraining the body

What happened to pop star Phil Collins is a case in point. As lead singer of the band "Genesis", Collins had to cope with numerous studio sessions and live concerts and these truly taxed his body and nervous system; in addition to those commitments, he was also busy working as a composer. During a longer stay in the United States, he suffered from acute hearing loss, which he described in the weekly paper "Die Zeit" as follows: "At the time, I was recording in the States and had spent the day singing in the studio. Then I collected my daughter from school. We got home, had something to eat, played a video game. Then suddenly my ear went sssssssh. Within a second my left ear simply closed down. As if I had been under water. I tried to clear it by pinching my nose. But it made no difference. So I thought it will sort itself out. But it didn't." Obviously Collins had a lot on his plate, which caused him to suffer from an infarction of the inner ear, another term for acute hearing loss. The stressed-out star, however, learned his lesson: "Although I'm not a deeply religious person, it seems like God – whoever He may be – slapped me on the ear and said: Will you finally hit the brakes and slow down! Take this as a warning and take things easier from now on."

Acute hearing loss, when it occurs suddenly and seemingly without a reason, is a warning signal that requires immediate action. Otherwise further serious consequences beyond the collapse of the inner ear are to be expected. A recent study in Taiwan actually suggests that acute hearing loss may be a warning sign for an impending stroke, as there is significant statistical evidence that acute hearing loss often precedes a stroke.

Unknown causes

Many specialist doctors attribute acute hearing loss primarily to insufficient blood circulation in the inner ear, which means the sensory cells in the cochlea as well as the balance system are not duly supplied with blood. The most widely used treatment therefore includes infusions of circulation-enhancing substances or oxygen to reduce or prevent damage caused by the "angina pectoris of the inner ear", another name for acute hearing loss. In many cases, cortisone is used as an additional remedy. Such treatment is more or less identical to that for tinnitus, but there is no scientific proof that it works. A growing number of experts are now convinced that quite apart from the psychological factors and stress, the causes may include viral infections, disorders of the immune system or dysfunctions in the nerve tracts of the inner ear. Given the lack of clarity here, it is at least comforting to know that for up to 70 percent of those affected, the problem eventually disappears completely by itself and their hearing ability rebounds. Half of the patients will finally be free of complaints. However, if a severe shortfall in hearing has not improved within six months, wearing a hearing instrument is recommended, if only for the damaged ear, to make up for the loss.

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Fonte: Revista Hear the World nº 10



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