

Loss of Hearing with a Cold Could be Sudden Deafness

December 19, 2005

Jeffrey Itrich

Sudden deafness is an ear emergency that strikes one person in 5000 every year, says Jeffrey Harris, M.D., UCSD Chief of Otolaryngology/Head and Neck Surgery. Harris says about half the patients may notice dizziness or imbalance for up to a day or two, but the main symptom is a blocked ear and tinnitus (ringing, roaring, or buzzing noise). If caught quickly, at least 50% of cases can be reversed with medical treatment.

"Current evidence suggests that sudden deafness usually arises as a complication of viral infection," says Harris. "The cold weather season is also the head cold season. Many patients who catch cold develop ear blockage and assume it is just congestion from the head cold when it could be sudden deafness. By the time the cold symptoms are gone and they notice that only one ear cleared and the other one is still blocked, it is often too late to treat the deafness."

Harris adds that if a person had normal hearing before getting a head cold, there is a simple test that will tell if a blocked ear is from congestion or nerve damage: Hum out loud. If you hear your voice louder in the blocked ear, the problem is congestion and is probably temporary. But, if you hear your voice louder in the good ear, this indicates possible nerve damage in the blocked ear.

A blocked ear should be examined by an otolaryngologist (ear, nose, throat, head and neck specialist) as soon as possible. UCSD is conducting a clinical trial on sudden deafness. For information about the trial call 858-657-6836 or visit www.suddendeafness.org. Media Contacts: Jeffrey Itrich, 619-543-6163.