

Enjoy life

How to help older people with sight
and hearing problems



sense
for deafblind people



As people get older they often start to experience problems with their hearing and vision. The challenges this can bring are often missed because it is seen as a normal part of ageing. Sensory loss can make it difficult to keep in touch with friends and family, take part in activities in the community and stay independent. It is really important that we recognise the early signs of hearing and sight loss in those around us, so that they can get the right support at the right time and continue to enjoy life.

For relatives and friends it can be difficult to know where to turn, and that's why I am pleased to be supporting Sense's Enjoy Life booklet which offers lots of easy practical and emotional ways in which you can support your loved one to continue getting the most from life.

Arlene Phillips CBE

Contents

- 1 Understanding hearing and sight loss
- 2 Different ways to communicate
- 3 Access to information
- 4 Ways of getting around
- 5 Maintaining home independence
- 6 Getting specialist support
- 7 Enjoying life
- 8 Where to go for more information

Do you have a relative who doesn't see or hear too well?

If you are reading this booklet you probably have a relative who doesn't see and hear too well. They may be struggling with daily life and you may not know how best to support them.

This booklet aims to help you understand what your relative is going through, how you can help and where to go for more support.



Understanding hearing and sight loss

1

As we age, our hearing and sight often deteriorates. At first we may just need glasses, or to turn the TV up a little. But if our hearing and sight get worse, things can become more difficult.

- If you lose your sight, so that it is hard to cross the road safely, you may need to ask for help. But how will you do that if you can't hear what people say to you in a noisy street?
- If you find it hard to hear what someone is saying, you watch their lips and facial expression for extra clues. But if you become partially sighted, how will you understand what is being said?

Too often people think this is just something which happens with age and assume nothing can be done. But even if there is no cure for the sight and hearing problems, support is available so that people can continue to live full and active lives.

Having both hearing and sight loss makes it doubly difficult to find ways to cope. People will usually have difficulty with communication, getting around and keeping in touch with friends and family. It is important to get the right support at the right time if people are to continue to enjoy life.



Sense tip
Don't assume someone can't enjoy life – look for help and support.

Case study Keeping in touch

Blind in her later years, Marcelle also wore a digital hearing aid in her left ear to make the most of her remaining hearing.

Marcelle moved in with her daughter's family when her husband passed away, determined to make a new life for herself.

As a very lively sociable person with many interests, it was important for her to keep in touch with other people. By going to a number of social clubs, including one run by a local society for blind people, she was able to try things like pottery and weaving for the first time.

She also went to a social club in the village where she made a number of new friends. The loop system in the village hall meant that she could hear the questions being read out in the weekly quiz above the background noise – sometimes better than the other people in her team!

Using headphones to listen to things like Talking Books she was also able to follow her passion for opera by listening to Radio 3.

"I wish I could see and hear but I can't so I just accept it. I haven't given up and I just try to get on with it," she said.



Different ways to communicate

2

One of the first problems faced by individuals who don't see and hear too well is communicating with other people. They may struggle to hear and often misunderstand what is being said. It is boring to have to keep asking for things to be repeated and many older people don't like to be 'a bother'. They may give up or pretend they have understood when they haven't.

Most people will continue to receive communication through speech, provided it is clear speech (a little slower and louder than usual with clear lip patterns). Here are some ways to make communication easier; communicating using these methods will probably be slower, but not so frustrating for you or your relative:



Before you start

- Make sure you have the person's attention.
- Check that hearing aids or other equipment are turned on and working.

Where to talk

- Between 3-6 feet apart, and at the same level if the person is lip-reading. You may need to move closer, or to the side, if hearing is better in one ear.
- Good lighting is important. Face the light so that your full face can be seen.
- Avoid background noise. Turn off the TV or radio or move somewhere quieter.

Clear speech

- Speak clearly.
- Talk a little more slowly than usual, but keep the natural rhythm of speech.
- Speak a little louder, but don't shout as this distorts your voice and lip patterns.
- Try to make your lip patterns clear, but don't over-exaggerate.



- Keep your face visible. Don't smoke, eat, or cover your mouth.

Help them understand

- Make the subject clear from the start and if you change the subject, make sure the person knows.
- Use gestures and facial expressions to support what you are saying.
- If necessary, repeat phrases. If this doesn't work, try re-phrasing the whole sentence. Some words are easier to lip-read than others.
- Don't hurry, take your time.
- Be aware that communicating can be hard work. Stop if the person gets tired.
- Be aware that if a person is smiling

and nodding it doesn't necessarily mean they have understood you.

- Never say 'oh it doesn't matter' and give up; find another way to communicate what you are trying to say.

Amplifying speech

Hearing aids can be very helpful in some everyday situations - such as having a conversation with one other person or watching television. However, they can take a little while to get used to, and situations where there is background noise or group conversations can be more challenging.

Hearing aids are free at the point of delivery from the NHS (meaning that there is no cost to you) and in many areas you can choose where you want to have your appointment; all you need is a referral from your GP. It is also possible to purchase hearing aids from a private provider.

Many public buildings such as theatres, churches, banks and post offices have loop systems fitted – look out for this sign:



Hearing aids usually have a loop setting (sometimes called the telecoil or 'T' setting) which the user can switch to by using a control on the hearing aid. Switching to this setting will cut down the background noise and allow the user to hear more clearly.

Loop systems can also be used around the home with items like the television. For more information contact Sense or ask your hearing aid provider. (Please note that the loop system

setting must be activated on your hearing aid before you can use it.)

Other devices

Assistive listening devices are available that can work with or without a hearing aid. These include personal amplifiers, amplified phones and vibrating alerts for sounds around the home, such as the doorbell. The Technology@Sense team can provide information and advice on the most appropriate technology for you/your family member. Your local authority technical officer and local societies or associations may also be able to help.

Other communication

Learning a new method of communication is challenging, so don't expect quick results. You may need specialist help.

Here are some tips...

Block

For some people, drawing out block letters on the palm of the hand is the easiest way to communicate. The block alphabet is shown on page 26. This is fairly easy to learn provided the individual is literate and has sufficient sensitivity in their palm to distinguish the letters.

Deafblind manual

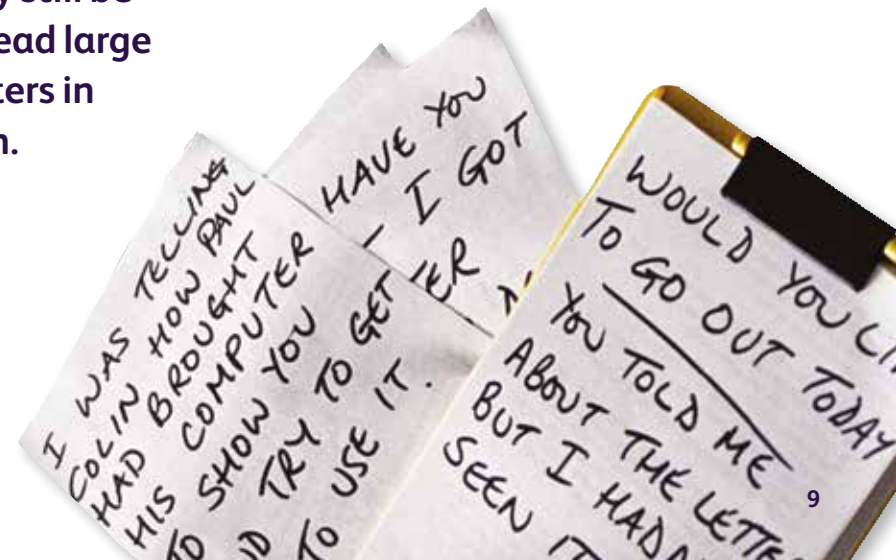
This is another way to spell out letters onto the hand using special hand shapes – see page 27. It is easy for you to learn but much harder for your relative to learn to receive. It is best to learn while they can still hear some speech, but this needs to be raised sensitively because the person may not want to admit that their hearing is getting worse.

Writing things down

Even if someone doesn't see too well they may still be able to read large clear letters in thick pen, maybe even with the help of a magnifier. Experiment with different sizes of letters and different colours of paper and pen.



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Access to information

3

Having access to information is vital – whether this is telling the difference between the tea and sugar jars, or knowing what is going on in the news. Keeping the mind active is important as we age – but this can be hard if radio, TV, newspapers and books are all hard to follow.

There are many different ways that people can receive information, and finding the right one for someone can make a big difference. The Equality Act 2010 means that many organisations produce information in all sort of formats. NHS England is developing an Accessible Information Standard for health and social care organisations to follow.



Audio tape and CDs

For people who can still hear speech, audio tape and CDs can be useful. Audio books allow people who can no longer read to continue their interest in fiction or learning. Audio newspapers are also available (contact RNIB – page 24 for more information).



Large print and magnifiers

Many older people will be able to read if large print is used – usually 14 point or above in bold. Most libraries provide books in large print and many service providers – such as banks – will offer large print on request.

There are also a wide range of magnifiers available which can help an older person to continue to read magazines, food labels and more.



Braille

Braille is hard to learn, but don't assume just because a person is older they cannot learn. We know of people in their 70s who have enjoyed learning braille. It can give access to many print materials such as books and leaflets.

With the right equipment it can also give access to computers including email and the internet.

It is extremely easy to produce stick-on braille tape to label jars and tins, and dangerous cleaning chemicals are labelled in braille by manufacturers. There is also a range of other labelling products available.



Sense tip
Large print and magnifiers are simple ways to make information easy to read.



Moon

Moon is much easier to learn than braille as it is based on the written alphabet. However, there is less information available in Moon and it doesn't give access to the internet. It can be very useful for labelling things.

Keeping in touch

Various groups and social clubs are available, including Sense's Hearing and Sight Impaired (HSI) group and branches. Sense, Deafblind UK and some local social services run social groups and forums in some areas. There are also many local societies for visually impaired and hearing impaired people where older people often get together to socialise.



Many local social groups and coffee mornings may also be able to meet an older person's needs. You could ask them to have a look at our booklet *Seeing Me* (www.sense.org.uk/seeing-me) which has lots of information to help them understand the challenges of sight and hearing loss – and to make the necessary adaptations to their services. Sense can also support and provide training if needed.

Sense also has a membership scheme for people with hearing and sight problems and their relatives – which brings people together to share ideas and information, and offers a sense of connection. Contact Sense for more details – see page 24.

Deafblind UK produce information for members in a range of formats (membership is free to people with hearing and sight problems). See page 25 for Deafblind UK contact details.

Ways of getting around

4

If you have been used to having sight to find your way around for most of your life it can be very difficult not to be able to do so any more. Even a partial loss of sight can have a big impact on someone's ability to get around or cross roads safely.

In the home

Most people will get around their own homes well enough, but will need help

to learn basic routes if they are in a new and unfamiliar place - such as a relative's home or a day centre. Walk them through the route, pointing out features on the way which will help them locate themselves - for instance the textured wallpaper in the corridor with the bathroom.

A useful technique for walking around safely is to hold one hand ahead while trailing the back of the other hand against a wall.



Out and about

If someone could make a simple journey unaided, to the local shop for instance, help him or her explore the route. Walk the route with them, pointing out key features to help orientate them such as changes of pavement surface or the number of gates they need to count. Talk to your local social services about assistance with mobility.

Find out about any local transport schemes for people with disabilities, such as 'dial-a-ride'. Your local council will tell you about these. Train operators offer special help to disabled passengers and concessions to the person accompanying them.

Communicator Guides

A Communicator Guide is a person trained in communication and guiding skills to work with people who have both hearing and sight loss. They will assist a person with a range of activities, such as dealing with mail or going to the shops. Some people can get this service from their social services department. Others purchase a service from local voluntary organisations, including Sense. Please contact us or your local authority sensory team (see page 24) for further information.

Sense tip
Help someone practice the route they want to take.

How to guide

- Offer your arm for them to hold and allow them to follow you. Don't grab, push or pull them.
- Judge the speed the person feels safe walking. If he/she has not been guided before they will probably want to go slowly. They may also have other physical problems such as arthritis which may make walking difficult or painful.
- Sudden changes of direction are best avoided.
- Let them hold the handrail on stairs and walk in front of them, waiting at the top or bottom to guide them.

- When you are showing a person to a seat or chair, put their hand on the arm or back of the chair and let them sit down. Don't try to push them into the seat.



Maintaining home independence

5

People with hearing and sight loss can be helped to maintain their independence by the careful use of equipment, adaptations and support. Training from a specialist is recommended – ask your social services department where to get this.

Some things you could try:

- Improve the level of lighting to suit the person. Most people prefer high levels of light and good task lighting. Others will need to dim the lighting



and eliminate glare, by putting in sun blinds for instance. Lighting needs to be carefully thought out on steps and stairs.

- Use colour contrast to highlight features and make them easier to find. For example, put contrasting tape on the edge of stairs and round plug sockets. Paint door frames and skirting boards a different colour from the doors, walls and carpets. Choose crockery that contrasts with worktops and tables.
- Move obvious hazards such as coffee tables in the middle of a floor, things that jut out at head height, or objects that can be tripped over such as rugs and waste bins.
- Use tactile clues to help people distinguish things. For instance, put one rubber band round the tinned tomatoes and two round the baked beans; bubble wrap on some door handles and string on others.



- Scented clues can help too. Put lemon-scented soap in the sock drawer and lavender bags with the jumpers for instance.

There is a wide range of equipment available such as textphones, tactile watches and alarm clocks that vibrate under your pillow. For people who find it hard to hear the doorbell or telephone, vibrating pagers that alert to these are available. There are literally hundreds of items to choose from to suit most people's basic needs.

There is information about useful equipment on the Sense website –

www.sense.org.uk/technology
RNIB and Action on Hearing Loss stock a range of useful items.

Flashing or vibrating fire alarms are also available and many fire services will install these free of charge.

When you come to visit don't:

- offer a plate at mealtimes without saying what is on it
- leave things, like your bag, where it could be a hazard. Doors should be left fully closed or fully open, never half open
- move furniture or objects in someone's home without discussing it first
- leave someone without explaining that you are going, or they could end up talking to an empty space.

Sense tip
Find out about aids and adaptations that can help people keep their independence.

Getting specialist support

6

Social Services

Although you may not think of your relative as 'deafblind' this does not always mean completely deaf and blind. Being considered 'deafblind' can help as it gives rights to particular services and a specialist assessment.

Most local authorities have a sensory team, and in many cases they have specialist workers for people with both hearing and sight loss. They are likely to be called a 'deafblind worker' or 'dual-sensory loss worker'.

Not everyone will be entitled to services from social services, and some will be asked to pay towards the cost. If a person has a certain level of income or savings they may not be entitled to social services. Another reason a person might be refused services would be if their needs are not considered high enough to qualify. If this happens, make sure the person who made that decision knows about the problems caused by having both hearing and sight loss. If they don't, your relative may have been wrongly assessed.

However, they are still entitled to a specialist assessment and information and advice about what would help and where to get support.

If your relative is entitled to support from social services they can receive this as a service, or as direct payments. Direct payments provide a person with money to buy their own service from whoever they wish to use. They can't normally be used to pay a member of your family who lives in the same house as the service user.

If your relative would prefer to have direct payments they should ask for this.

For more information on how to get support from social services contact the Sense Information & Advice Service (see page 24 for contact details).

Support from other organisations

If social services cannot offer any help to your relative (and you have decided not to appeal against this) it may be worth considering using a private care agency or voluntary organisation for support and services.

There are many different voluntary organisations that might be able to help. What is available depends partly on where you live. In some areas Sense, Deafblind UK or local associations for the blind may provide Communicator Guide services directly to your relative as a self-funder.

In many areas local voluntary organisations can provide information, advice, possibly even equipment you can look at to see if it is suitable. Your local sensory impairment team should be able to advise, or you can call the Sense Information and Advice Service who can let you know what is available in your area.

Care agencies can offer different packages of care to help someone to keep their independence. However, it is important to confirm that the care agency you use has the training and skills needed to meet the unique sensory needs of your relative. Sense and other organisations, can offer training to staff if needed.

If you decide to purchase support privately it is important that this is monitored to make sure you are happy with the quality of service offered.



Enjoying life

7

One of the greatest challenges for older people with hearing and sight loss is to enjoy the activities they used to and even reading or watching the television can become difficult. However, it is possible to adapt some activities; gardening, for instance, is enjoyed by older people with impaired sight including totally blind people.

Don't assume your relative has to give up activities they once enjoyed; for example, cooking can be fun again for people who enjoy it, and people with some sight may be able to use large print knitting patterns. Look for ways to adapt activities to make them accessible and ask for specialist help if necessary. It is also worth considering

new activities that your relative may enjoy.

For people with very severe sensory loss, the solutions have to be tactile. RNIB sells a number of tactile games, such as dominoes and playing cards which can be played with sighted and hearing people too. Some museums, galleries and cathedrals offer 'touch tours' for people who cannot see exhibits.



Some organisations run holiday hotels offering special services to people with sensory problems. Sense also runs holidays for deafblind people in a variety of locations and events. Contact our Information and Advice Service (see page 24) for more information.

Sense tip
Contact your local society for blind or deaf people and see what they can offer. RNIB sells tactile games like dominos and cards for people who can't see well.



Dealing with depression and other problems

Hearing and sight loss can be extremely frustrating and many people become depressed, angry or withdrawn. Often these difficulties arise because they have no means to communicate their feelings and anxieties.

Establishing a workable way of communicating is therefore very important. It can be very time-consuming and requires a great deal of patience, but it will reap dividends. Talking to a sympathetic listener can often help people move on in their lives and adapt successfully to their new situation. Severe depression may require medical help.

Extra money

Older people with impaired sight and hearing will almost certainly qualify for:

- Disability Living Allowance, or
- Personal Independence Payment (for people up to 65), or
- Attendance Allowance (for people over 66).

Other benefits such as council tax concessions and housing benefit may also be available. The benefits system is not easy to understand so we encourage everyone to get specialist advice. Sense's Information and Advice Service can help (contact information is on page 24). These benefits are there to help with the extra costs of disability.

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Talking to a sympathetic listener can often help people adapt successfully to their new situation.



Where to go for more information

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Your local sensory team

Social services in every area have sensory specialists who will be able to help with advice and information and may be able to provide services. Contact your local council for their details. They will be able to tell you about local associations for the blind and local deaf associations.

Sense's Information and Advice Service

Sense's Information & Advice Service offers accurate, comprehensive and up-to-date impartial information and advice for people who are deafblind or have sensory impairments, their families and professionals working with them. Anyone who has a general enquiry about Sense or any aspect of deafblindness or sensory impairment is welcome to contact them. The service covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

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RNIB

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London WC1H 9NE
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Email: helpline@rnib.org.uk
Web: www.rnib.org.uk

Action on Hearing Loss

19-23 Featherstone Street
London EC1Y 8SL
Tel: 0808 808 0123
Text: 0808 808 9000
Email: informationline@rnid.org.uk
Web: www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk
Online shop: actiononhearingloss.org.uk/shop

Deafblind UK

National Centre for
Deafblindness
John and Lucille van Geest Place
Cygnet Road
Hampton, Peterborough
Cambridgeshire PE7 8FD
Helpline tel/text: 01733 358100
Email: info@deafblind.org.uk
Web: www.deafblind.org.uk

Visionary – Linking Local Sight Loss Charities

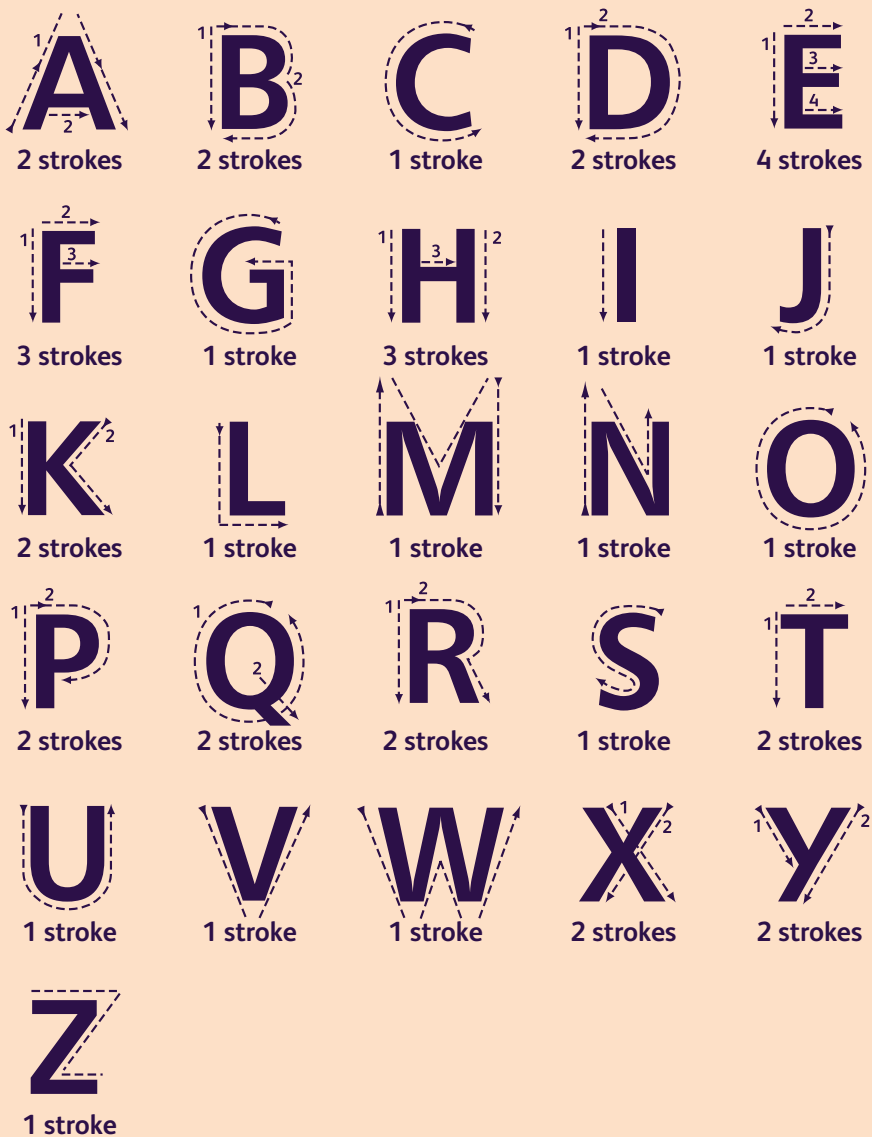
Will assist you in finding your local
sight loss charity.
Tel: 0208 417 0942
Email: visionary@visionary.org.uk
Web: www.visionary.org.uk



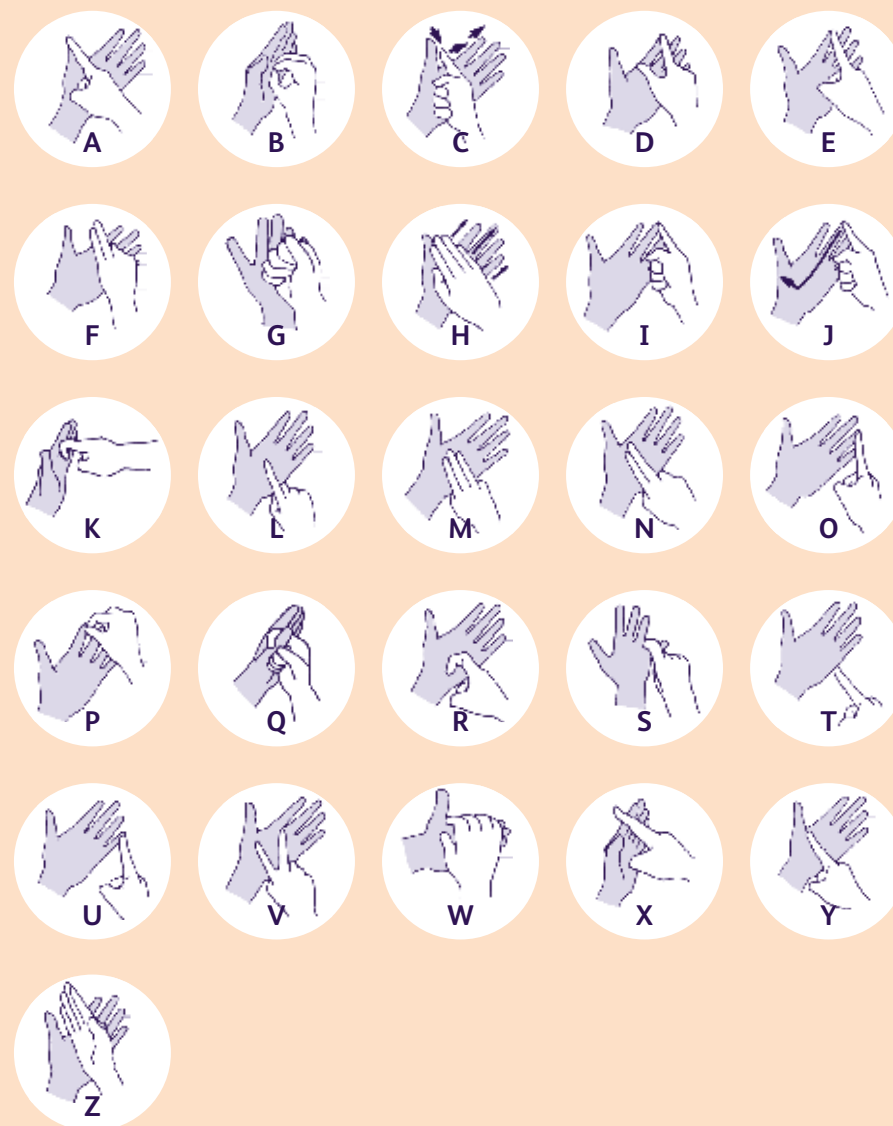
**Sense offers
accurate,
comprehensive
and impartial
information.**



Teach yourself the block alphabet



Teach yourself the deafblind manual alphabet



This booklet is for people with an older relative or friend who doesn't see and hear too well. They may be struggling with daily life and you may not know how best to support them. It aims to help you understand what they are going through, how you can help and where to go for more support.

About Sense

Sense is the leading national charity that supports and campaigns for children, adults and older people who are deafblind. We provide expert advice and information as well as specialist services to individuals, their families, carers and the professionals who work with them. In addition, we support people who have sensory impairments with additional disabilities.

Sense offers information and advice to carers of older people, it also offers guidance to a range of professionals who may meet older people with sensory impairments.

Sense

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Web: www.sense.org.uk/content/older-people

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Registered charity number: 289868



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for deafblind people