



# How to work with a person who is deaf or hearing impaired

People with hearing loss group themselves into two broad categories:

- **Deaf people** – ‘Deaf’ (with a capital ‘D’) refers to those who are part of a Deaf community with their own language, culture, values and beliefs. Deaf people identify as “Culturally Deaf” and prefer to view themselves as being part of a culturally and linguistically diverse group (CALD) rather than as a person with a disability (PWD); and
- **Hearing impaired people** – This diverse group can be either born with hearing loss (from mild to profound) or lose their hearing after the acquisition of speech. They have usually been raised using oral communication.

**Deaf** people mainly communicate using Auslan (Australian sign language) which uses a unique grammar and precise hand shapes to convey information. Auslan is a combination of signs, facial expression and body language. Finger spelling is used where no sign exists such as for names of places or people.

**Lip reading** is an incredibly difficult skill to master and reading ability and proficiency varies. Only 30 to 40 per cent of speech is recognisable through lip reading. For many Deaf people, English is a second language (Auslan being their first) so ability to read and write proficiently in English varies greatly.

## Use a qualified Auslan sign language interpreter to improve communication with a Deaf person.

Sometimes if the Deaf person has both minimal English skills and minimal Auslan skills, it may be necessary to also use a Deaf Relay Interpreter (DRI). This may be relevant to Deaf people from other spoken language groups or to Deaf Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.

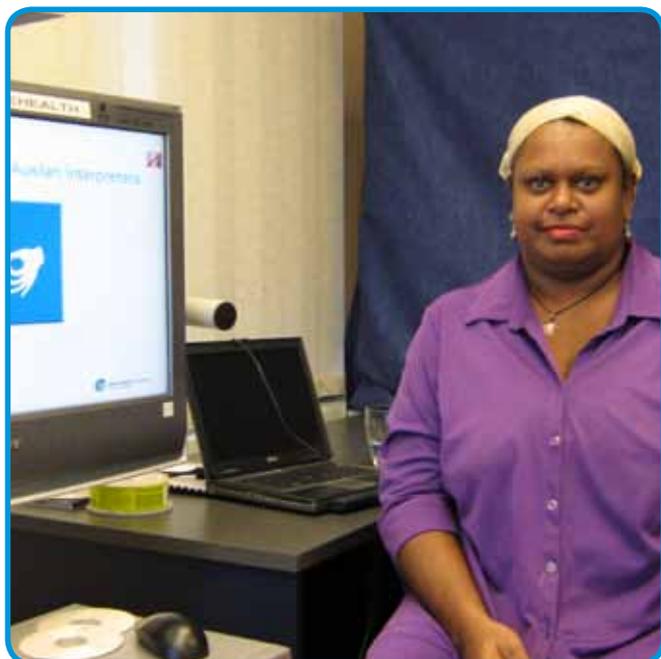
People who are **hearing impaired** mainly use speech and lip reading to assist with communication. Communication ability varies depending on the degree of hearing loss, benefit of hearing aids or cochlear implants, and speech/lip reading ability. Some hearing impaired people do learn sign language and although wishing to speak for themselves, may request an interpreter to help them understand what is being said.

Communication is made more difficult by environmental factors such as background noise and poor lighting. It is often assisted by providing written information and allowing breaks in conversation to reduce fatigue. Ask the person about the most effective way to communicate with them.

## Good communication strategies

- **Gain attention:** Call the person by name and/or gently touch their arm or shoulder. If the person is **Deaf**, it is OK to flick the lights ‘on’ and ‘off’, to tap on a table or to wave to gain attention
- **Face each other:** Hearing impaired and Deaf people need to see your face clearly to gain help from facial expressions and to lip read. Maintain the same eye level e.g. sit if the person is sitting and use eye contact. Avoid shadows on your face and habits such as pencil chewing and putting your hands in front of your face
- **Avoid background noise:** If possible move to a quiet area or reduce noise. Televisions, radios, people taking in the background and air conditioning may interfere with the person’s ability to understand
- **Reduce the distance:** The level of voice decreases over distance. Standing within one metre of the person is recommended
- **Optimise lighting:** Good lighting helps with lip reading ability. Avoid backlighting or silhouette effects
- **Speak clearly:** Speak at a normal or slightly slower pace, and keep your volume up but natural. If appropriate, direct your voice to the better ear but make sure your face is clearly visible. Do not shout or exaggerate words as speech and lip movements are distorted. Be aware that an unfamiliar accent, beards and moustaches may impede lip reading
- **State the subject:** Let the person know the subject of the conversation and cue in to any change of topic (let people know if there will be any change to the topic being discussed)
- **Check for understanding** – Ask for feedback to check for understanding of what has been said. Use open-ended questions rather than yes or no questions. **Remember that smiling and nodding does not always confirm understanding**
- **Repeat, rephrase or write down** key messages to help with communication e.g. names, dates, times and medication dosages. Make use of diagrams and handouts
- **Use facial and body expression:** It is OK to point. Do not use exaggerated mime or facial expressions
- **Check hearing aids are working:** If you are not sure contact an Audiologist for help. If the person wears glasses, check they are worn to help with lip reading

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Alma Waia, Indigenous Deaf Relay Interpreter.

## Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Deaf clients

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Deaf clients may require the use of an Indigenous Deaf Relay Interpreter (IDRI) in addition to an Auslan interpreter. Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Deaf people are multilingual and multicultural, some are still acquiring an understanding of non-Indigenous culture and particularly government processes.

Some Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Deaf clients may have minimal language competency (MLC), which denotes only minimal skills across all languages. It is for this reason that people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander may require the additional services of an IDRI who can factor in cross-cultural explanations and cater to the linguistic needs of the client (ie. those who use an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander dialect of Auslan). Auslan Interpreters are simply not able to match this cultural and linguistic level.

**The National Auslan Booking and Payment Service (NABS)** provide free Auslan and Indigenous Deaf relay services for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Deaf consumers.

For Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Deaf clients your District Interpreter Service Coordinator will book your Auslan and IDR interpreters through NABS.

## Useful contacts

Queensland Health Multicultural Services

[www.qheps.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural](http://www.qheps.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural)

Tel: (07) 3328 9873

Fax: (07) 3328 9115

Email: [multicultural@health.qld.gov.au](mailto:multicultural@health.qld.gov.au)

Princess Alexandra Hospital Centre of Excellence  
– Statewide Consultation Service for People  
who are Deaf or hearing impaired

[www.health.qld.gov.au/pahospital/mentalhealth/damh.asp](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/pahospital/mentalhealth/damh.asp)

Tel: (07) 3167 8430

Fax: (07) 3167 8377

Mob: 0419 023 8 83 (office)  
0416 191 883 (Di Briffa)

Indigenous Deaf Wellbeing Project  
Princess Alexandra Hospital

PO Box 5970 CAIRNS QLD 4870

Mob: 0488 377 787

Fax: (07) 4031 1383

## Interpreter service providers

Queensland Health External Interpreter Service Provider:  
ONCALL Interpreters & Translators Agency Pty Ltd

Tel: (07) 3115 6999

Fax: (07) 3839 8264

Email: [bookings.qld@oncallinterpreters.com](mailto:bookings.qld@oncallinterpreters.com)

National Auslan Booking and Payment Service (NABS)

[www.nabs.org.au](http://www.nabs.org.au)

Tel: 1800 246 945

Fax: 1800 246 914

Email: [Bookings@nabs.org.au](mailto:Bookings@nabs.org.au)

SMS: 0427 671 261

Deaf Services Queensland (DSQ) /  
Sign Language Communication

[www.deafservicesqld.org.au](http://www.deafservicesqld.org.au)

Tel: 1300 789 439 Statewide Interpreter Booking number

Fax: (07) 3392 8511

Email: [interpreter.bookings@deafsq.org.au](mailto:interpreter.bookings@deafsq.org.au)

Sign Language Services Australia (Australia-wide)

[www.slsa.net.au](http://www.slsa.net.au)

Tel: 1300 664 277

Fax: 1300 795 584

SMS: 0422 485 306

Email: [bookings@slsa.net.au](mailto:bookings@slsa.net.au)