

Nurse sounds a warning on hearing loss for COVID-19 patients

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UniSA nursing lecturer Kim Gibson who lost her hearing temporarily after contracting a mild case of COVID-19. Credit: University of South Australia

A University of South Australia nursing lecturer has used her own COVID-19 experience to inform research into a little-known side effect

of the virus—sudden deafness.

Kim Gibson, a [registered nurse](#) with a clinical background in [neonatal intensive care](#), has documented her experience with sudden sensorineural hearing loss (SSNHL) five weeks after testing positive to COVID-19. She was fully vaccinated.

Her findings and recommendations are published in *BMJ Case Reports*.

Gibson developed acute hearing loss in one ear, along with vertigo and tinnitus several weeks after experiencing a mild COVID-19 infection in 2022.

She was referred to an otolaryngologist who confirmed [sensorineural hearing loss](#), a little known and poorly understood side effect of COVID-19 that is not listed as a common symptom on most websites, or by GPs.

A course of oral prednisolone and betahistine was prescribed, and Gibson's hearing slowly improved over subsequent months, although she continues to experience intermittent tinnitus.

"The evidence around the short and long-term impacts of COVID-19 and vaccines is still emerging and the aim of this paper is to highlight the lesser-known side effects of the virus," Gibson says.

"We believe that clinicians should include sudden hearing loss as a potential side effect of COVID-19 when talking to patients. High-dose corticosteroids are a recommended first line of treatment for SSNHL and it is important that GPs promptly refer patients to specialists as soon as symptoms develop.

"Hearing loss and associated symptoms can have a significant impact on

a person's quality of life—they did in my case—and are closely related with anxiety and depression."

Gibson said that despite working in [health education](#), she was not aware of COVID-19 causing hearing loss.

"This was a shocking experience for me that had a significant impact on my quality of life for several months as I had never had any problems with hearing before; not even an ear infection.

"I was unable to drive a car while experiencing severe vertigo. I needed to reduce my workload, negotiate flexible working hours with my employers and take a leave of absence from study. This was all due to a mild COVID-19 infection.

"I was worried that the hearing loss would be permanent and that I would need a hearing aid. I now feel very nervous about a second COVID-19 infection. What if I experience this again, or even worse?"

According to the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, [sudden sensorineural hearing loss](#)—also known as sudden deafness—occurs when you lose your hearing very quickly, typically only in one ear. It can happen instantly or over a span of several days. People can experience mild hearing impairment or total loss of hearing and it may be temporary or permanent.

Previous studies have linked SSNHL with COVID-19, as well as a potential side effect of COVID vaccination, but the evidence is still limited, Gibson says.

"My experience shows that even people who have a minor COVID-19 infection could be at risk of potentially permanent and debilitating long-term effects. High quality, person-centered care is so critical."

A [study](#) of [hearing loss](#) during the pandemic showed that approximately one third of patients with SSNHL were positive with COVID-19 when they were referred to an audiologist. Other [studies](#) reported an increase of SSNHL in 2020 and 2021, including among [asymptomatic people](#).

More information: Kim Gibson et al, Experience of sudden sensorineural hearing loss following a mild COVID-19 infection, *BMJ Case Reports* (2023). [DOI: 10.1136/bcr-2022-252899](https://doi.org/10.1136/bcr-2022-252899)

Provided by University of South Australia

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