

## Health check

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# Living life to full is loud and clear message

Laura Muller was born with 50 per cent hearing loss but she has never let it hold her back.

Catherine Scott meets her.

BEING a professional skydiver is a challenge for anyone but when you only have 50 per cent hearing the challenge is all the greater.

Laura Muller's lack of hearing wasn't diagnosed until she was 15. Up until then they thought she had selective hearing which meant she only heard what she wanted to.

"Because you don't know anything else you don't realise that something is wrong," says Laura. Once she was diagnosed she was fitted with an NHS hearing aid.

"It was a strange feeling being suddenly able to hear things you haven't heard before, but I found the hearing aids very difficult to get on with. I was never happy as I had to take them off in loud places and didn't really end up wearing the devices very often."

This caused problems during lessons as Laura couldn't wear the aids as all they picked up was the background noise from the other people in the class.

"I got teased for not being able to hear very well."

When she started at Lancaster University Laura, from Yeadon, began to wear the hearing aids permanently. "I wasn't very confident talking amongst large groups of people as I wouldn't be

able to hear individuals very well with all the background noise."

It was during her first year at university that Laura took up skydiving, although she decided to keep it a secret from her family.

"I'd always wanted to try skydiving but my mum really wasn't keen on the idea. But when I went to university and got the chance I gave it a go and was hooked. I've always been into adrenalin sports and skydiving seemed like the ultimate adrenalin sport."

But it wasn't until she left university that Laura thought about making it her career.

"My hearing problems hadn't been too much of an issue while I was at university, but when I left to try and get a job in the 'real' world you needed to be able to hear properly. I didn't plan to go into skydiving as a career I just went to help out at a training centre over the summer and then offered me a job. I absolutely love it."

In the last year Laura estimates she has done around 200 jumps, many from as high as 15,000 feet. She competes competitively in a four-way team, but at one point she feared her hearing problem could jeopardise her future.

"I was faced with various



**TAKING THE PLUNGE:** Laura Muller, whose new hearing aids have helped her as a competitive skydiver and instructor.

problems caused by my hearing aids – my helmet wouldn't fit very well, the hearing aids would dig into my ears or they would be pulled off. Obviously skydiving is a dangerous sport so I couldn't take my hearing aids out as I need to hear at all times. I also found that the hearing aids would turn themselves off in the plane during the climb to altitude or when I was under canopy, so sometimes I was unable to hear people in the plane. The rise to altitude and the pressure changes also affected

the way the aids worked as well.

"Sometimes they would stop working for days at a time, which left me struggling to hear. In addition, the noise under canopy was sometimes unbearable as the aids seemed to pick up all the background noise of the wind. "Sometimes this hurt my ears to a point where I would decide not to jump.

"As I wanted to start competing in skydiving at a national level these problems needed to be sorted. I searched around



and eventually found out about the new Phonak Ambra hearing aids."

At £4,000 the hearing aids aren't cheap but Laura says they are worth every penny.

"I was fitted within a few weeks at Digital Hearing Care in Keighley and couldn't believe how much sound I missed with my old hearing aids. The new devices sit in the ear so the problem of wearing a helmet immediately was solved. The sound

## HEARING LOSS AFFECTS MILLIONS

- There are more than 10 million people in the UK with some form of hearing loss, or one in six of the population.
- More than 800,000 people in the UK are severely or profoundly deaf.
- There are more than 45,000 deaf children in the UK, plus many more who experience temporary hearing loss.
- About two million people in the UK have hearing aids, but only 1.4 million use them regularly.
- Four million more people would benefit from using a hearing aid.

quality is also amazing so it immediately made me a much more confident person and I hear as well as everyone else now. These hearing aids are able to withstand the climb to altitude and they have never once stopped working either on the plane or under canopy. It's made my life so much easier and I don't have to worry about losing them or damaging them when skydiving. My progression in the sport I love is definitely due to these hearing aids. Since having them I've competed in a national team and we won a bronze medal. I am competing again this year at a higher level.

"I have even taken up skiing, something I've always wanted to do but haven't had the confidence to take part in as I thought I wouldn't be able to hear anything.

"The confidence these hearing aids have given me has made such an incredible difference to my life and my sport." Laura is now a fully-qualified skydiving instructor.

"I just can't explain why I love it so much; It's impossible to put it into words."

One thing is for certain, this adrenalin junkie is showing that a disability need never stand in your way when it comes to realising your dreams.

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