

Cochlear Family

Adult communication
strategies guide



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Introduction

Hearing and listening practice is an important part of the hearing journey that can help you get the most out of your device. Focusing on communication can help with listening skills, self-advocacy, self-confidence and healthy communication.

Contained within this guide are exercises designed to build conversational confidence, and practical advice to help support better communication. We recommend speaking with your hearing healthcare professional or clinical team for a more tailored rehabilitation plan.

Practical advice to support better communication

Factors that influence communication

There are often a number of different factors that can influence understanding during conversation. These factors tend to fall into three main categories: Speaker, Environment and Listener. The table below lists some common factors that can influence understanding in each of these categories along with some examples of things that can impair your ability to understand what is being said.

SPEAKER	ENVIRONMENT	LISTENER
<input type="checkbox"/> Accent	<input type="checkbox"/> Visual distractions	<input type="checkbox"/> Interested in topic
<input type="checkbox"/> Direction of gaze e.g. looking away	<input type="checkbox"/> Auditory distractions e.g. too much background noise	<input type="checkbox"/> Emotional state e.g. feeling ill or irritated
<input type="checkbox"/> Visibility of face e.g. hand covering mouth	<input type="checkbox"/> Room acoustics e.g. echo	<input type="checkbox"/> Speech processor positioning
<input type="checkbox"/> Speaking rate e.g. Speaking too quickly or too slowly	<input type="checkbox"/> Distance between the speaker and listener	<input type="checkbox"/> Communication style
<input type="checkbox"/> Volume e.g. Speaking too loudly or softly	<input type="checkbox"/> Visibility of the speaker	<input type="checkbox"/> Assertiveness
<input type="checkbox"/> Facial hair or facial expressions e.g. exaggerated lip movements	<input type="checkbox"/> Availability of assistive listening devices e.g. wireless accessories	<input type="checkbox"/> Motivation to hear
<input type="checkbox"/> Eating or chewing	<input type="checkbox"/> Lighting e.g. dim or glaring	<input type="checkbox"/> Lip reading ability

Exercise:
Go through the table and consider each of the factors that fall under the three different categories. Next, reflect on each of the factors and determine what is and what isn't within the control of the conversation participants. For example, start with the Speaker category.

- **Accent:** This is a factor that is not within the control of the participant. So, put an "X" in the box.
- **Looking Away:** This is a factor that is within the control of the participant. So, put a "✓" in the box.
- **Speaking too loudly or softly:** This is a factor that may be within the control of the participant. So, put a "✓" in the box.

We will ask you to revisit this checklist in at the end of this guide, so remember to keep a copy once you have completed it.

Communication styles

Let’s look at three different communication styles: **Observer**, **Leader** and **Diplomat**. The goal of this section is to provide you with strategies and the understanding to handle challenging communication situations confidently.

Bear in mind that there are other factors that can influence the communication style adopted in each situation, e.g. relationship to the speaker, power balance, cultural expectations, environment and the topic of conversation¹.

The Observer

This communication style is adopted in situations where it’s perceived as easier to take a step back. During conversation, you may choose to withdraw due to concerns that you will not be able to communicate well. Or, you may adopt a more observational role because you are worried that you might mishear and provide an inappropriate response.

An observational approach is not always negative. In some situations, stepping back and taking the time to listen can be very positive for fostering relationships. However, it’s important to recognise when to use a more directive or diplomatic communication style in order to take advantage of social, educational, or future vocational opportunities.

The Leader

This communication style assumes the role of the primary communicator and tends to adopt a more directive approach to help guide conversation. You might use this approach in situations where you have concerns about mishearing or providing an inappropriate response during conversation.

A positive aspect to this communication style, is that it gives you the opportunity to express your feelings and advocate for your needs. However, it’s important to know when to adopt a more observational or diplomatic approach to facilitate a better outcome for both conversational partners.

The Diplomat

This communication style is well received by most conversational partners and can often result in more positive outcomes for both parties. A diplomatic approach to conversations encourages equal participation between conversational partners and may make it easier for you to express your feelings and advocate for your needs.

Depending on the situation, this communication style can also make it easier for you to ask for help from communication partners to reduce breakdown in conversation.

Exercise:
For this exercise there are three steps you can follow to help you reflect on your communication style. But remember, communications styles can evolve over time, vary according to different situations, and can depend on who you are speaking with.

1 Go through the three different communication styles and think about how you generally interact with others during conversations. Then, select the category that you think best suits your communication style.


2 Next, think about whether your communication style is the same with all conversational partners, or if you adapt your style based on who you are speaking with. Think about situations where you are speaking with family, friends, colleagues and strangers. Does your communication style change based on the people that you are speaking with?

Refer to the table below and begin categorising your communication style with different partners by placing a “✓” in the appropriate box:

	Family	Friends	Colleagues	Strangers
Observer				
Leader				
Diplomat				

3 For this last step, think about why it’s important to develop the skills to be able to confidently communicate your hearing needs. To help you get started, we’ve listed some reasons below:

- The way we communicate can influence the impression we make on others.
- Sometimes, people we are communicating with are unsure of how they can help.
- Being able to confidently communicate your needs with different conversational partners can help open up opportunities socially, educationally, and professionally.



“Don’t hesitate to ask for the person to repeat themselves or to move to a quieter location if you cannot hear them clearly.”

Alana, Cochlear™ Nucleus® System recipient

Six steps to improving communication

Try these strategies to improve your understanding during conversations:

1. Answering the question: “How do I see myself?”
2. Explaining your cochlear implant
3. Managing the environment
4. Identifying the current strategies used
5. Experimenting with new strategies
6. Phrasing for optimal results

Here’s how you can use these strategies in your daily life:

Exercise:

Answer the question “How do I see myself?”

- 1 Consider how you identify with your hearing loss. Specifically, do you identify with the terms “deaf”, “Deaf”, “hard-of-hearing”, “hearing impaired”, “hearing” or as having a “hearing loss?” Understanding how you yourself will help you better communicate your needs with others.

Explaining your hearing device

- 2 Think about how you will describe your device(s) to others. There may be situations where you are asked about your hearing loss. Being prepared with a response you are comfortable with can make it easier for you to talk about your hearing device.

Managing the environment

- 3 Think about situations where you find communicating with others most difficult. Consider how you are positioned in each situation and what you could do to make it easier to communicate.

Then, think about what accommodations you are happy to request in each situation (e.g., moving to a quieter area of the restaurant or choosing a quiet meeting room in the office). This exercise is designed to highlight that the choices you make and your willingness to speak up may help to improve communication environments that can be challenging.

Identifying current strategies used

- 4 What do you tend to do when you are struggling to hear during conversations? Make a note of some of the strategies you currently use. Most often, people with hearing loss rely on asking speakers to repeat as the primary strategy to repair communication breakdown.

However, this request is usually posed indirectly e.g., by saying “Huh?”, “Beg your pardon?” or something similar. These requests are non-specific and are shown to be the least successful communication repair strategies. This is because speakers often don’t change the way they communicated the first time. We will go through more effective repair strategies in the next exercise.

Experimenting with new strategies

- 5 Instead of asking someone to repeat, use very specific requests that prompt the speaker to alter their communication. For example, try the following:

- “Can you please lower your hand so that I can read your lips?”
- “Can we move into the light so that I can see your face?”
- “Can you please try saying the same thing in a different way?”

Sometimes the people you are communicating with can be unsure of how to respond when those with hearing loss do not understand. We encourage you to try new strategies in different situations, starting with familiar conversational partners. Try to keep track of those that you have tried and make a note of those that work and those that don’t.

Phrasing for best results

- 6 This next strategy can be adopted once you are comfortable with step 5. Think about how you can phrase your requests to better achieve the result you are after. Here are five tips to try:

- Use “I” statements and try not to blame others
- Make a specific request
- Explain why you are making the request
- Be courteous
- Express your gratitude

Step 5 uses the first two points, but once you are comfortable, try making more sophisticated requests which incorporate the final three points. It is important to explain why the request is being made because those with normal hearing may not know what to do. For example, they may not know that a person with a cochlear implant might read lips. It’s important to be courteous so the speaker will feel good about a request.

Being appreciative helps the speaker to remember how they can help and they will be more likely to help the next time. Below are some examples of phrases that incorporate all five points:

- Instead of “You need to speak up, it’s too noisy in here” try “My cochlear implant helps me understand a lot better, but I still have trouble in noise – would you mind if we move to a quieter place in the room?”
- Instead of “Can you move your hand away from your face” try “Excuse me James, can you please lower your hand? Thank you, that makes it easier for me to lipread and follow what you are saying.”

Communication and repair strategies

There are three ways you can help make conversation smoother and reduce potential frustration. Try these strategies with family and close friends.

Once you feel more confident educate fellow students and colleagues how they can help facilitate better communication.

Clear speech strategies

1 “Clear speech” is when the speaker attempts to express every word and sentence in a precise, accurate and fully formed manner. Use of “Clear speech” can improve hearing and understanding up to 20%².

The best way to encourage clear speech from others, is to ask them to speak at a “normal” rate. In fact, asking someone to speak at a normal rate is preferable to asking them to speak more “clearly” so as not to suggest that their speech was previously sloppy. Below are some clear speech techniques and phrases:

- When stating an opinion or making suggestions, start by saying “I think”.
- When changing a subject, you can try saying “Now I want to talk about something else”.

Anticipatory strategies

2 Preparation is key. Before entering a communication situation, it helps to be prepared by considering who will be there and what might be said. You may find it helpful to develop a list of anticipated vocabulary, names and dialogue for a particular situation and practise speech reading those words ahead of time.

Repair strategies

3 Repair strategies are ways to help fix breakdowns in conversation and communication understanding. Here are some strategies and how to request them:

• Change environments

Look at your environment and check if it has bad lighting, background noise or poor acoustics. For example, if you are having a conversation in a noisy room, you could try saying, “I’d love to hear what you have to say, but I’m having trouble here – would you mind if we moved to the corner of the room?”

• Face each other

Don’t be afraid to remind others to face you when communicating. This will give you more access to important visual cues and keep the speech directed at you. For example, try saying “James, I lipread best when I can see your face straight on. Thank you”.

• Speak at a normal level

If someone is yelling or speaking too loudly, speech can become distorted. Educating others plays a big role in improving communication, and there are ways to ask others to speak at an optimal volume. For example, try saying, “My implant makes speech loud enough for me. Thank you for trying to help me, but you can speak at a normal volume. It will be more helpful if you speak naturally.”

• Repeat slower

This is the single most effective strategy and quite similar to the one above. If a speaker is asked for a simple repetition, they will most likely repeat exactly the way they spoke the first time or speak louder and exaggerate their lip movements— neither of which is helpful. Instead, it’s better to ask that the speaker repeat more slowly.

• Rephrase

This is an effective, but underused, strategy. Often, when a speaker is asked to rephrase, they automatically choose words that are easier to hear and/or speech read. This is a more effective strategy than a repetition. You could try this repair strategy by saying, “I didn’t follow what you said. Could you please say that in a different way?”

• Use key words

Communication is more effective when the topic is known. It is easier to predict what will be said next when a topic or key word of a conversation has been stated. For example, you could try saying, “I am not able to understand what you are saying. Can you tell me the subject please?”

• Confirm what you have heard

A great repair strategy that you can adopt is to use clarification. When you use this confirmation strategy, it demonstrates that you are interested in what the speaker has to say and are trying to understand. Try using this strategy when you understand part of the conversation but are unsure of what was actually said. For example, you can start by saying, “Did you say....?”

How to apply communication strategies

Now that you have a greater understanding of the key steps to improve communication it’s time to revisit the table in the first exercise.

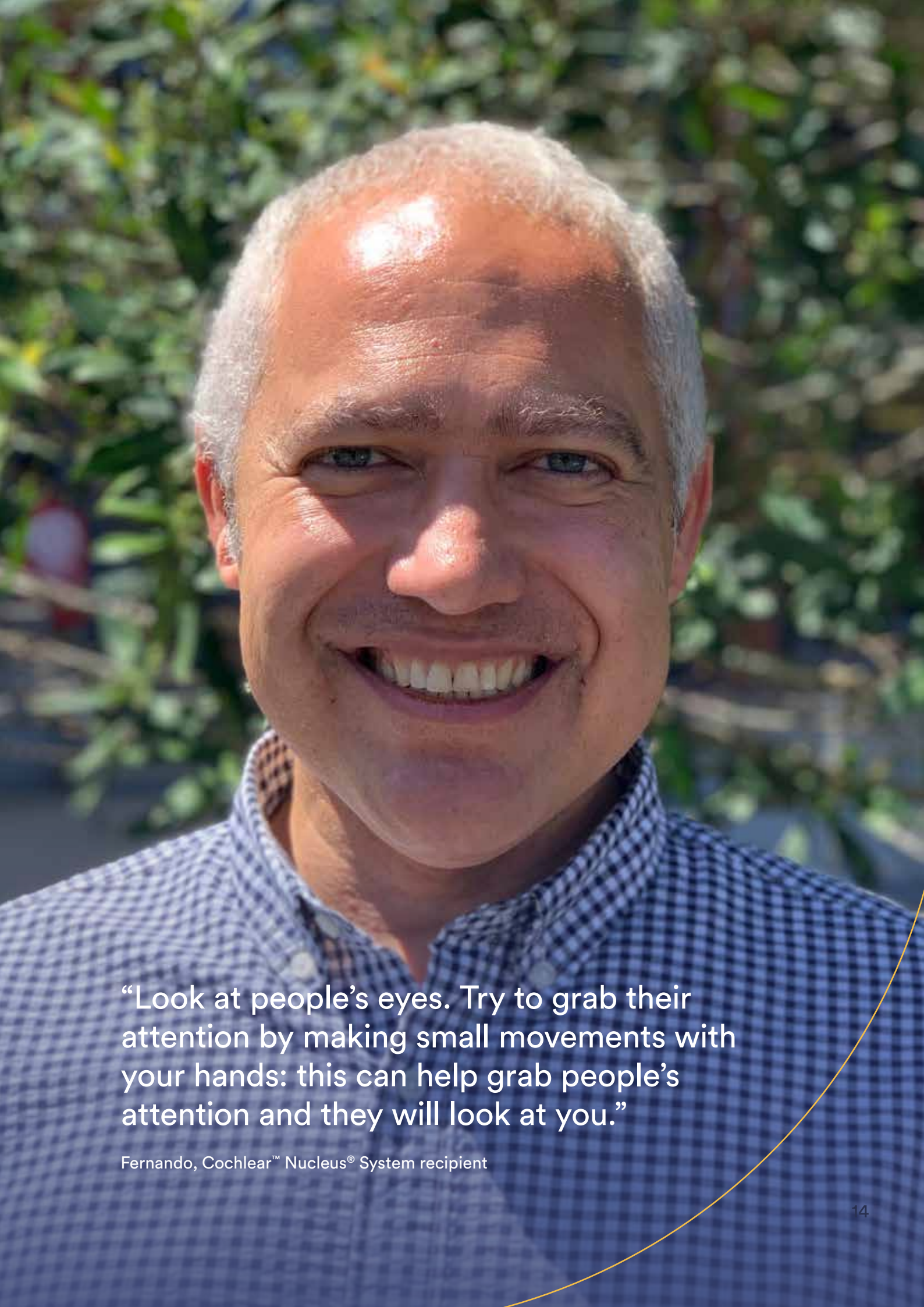
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<input type="checkbox"/> Visibility of face e.g. hand covering mouth	<input type="checkbox"/> Room acoustics e.g echo	<input type="checkbox"/> Speech processor positioning
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<input type="checkbox"/> Eating or chewing	<input type="checkbox"/> Lighting e.g. dim or glaring	<input type="checkbox"/> Lip reading ability

Exercise:
In the first exercise, we asked you to go through the table, reflect on each of the factors and determine what is and what isn’t within the control of the conversation participants.

For this last exercise, we are asking you to look at this table again and consider if you want to change where the “X” or “✓” has been placed.

Where you have put a “✓”, think about different repair strategies you could use to address these issues and practise using the correct phrasing.

For more information, please contact your local Cochlear customer service team.



“Look at people’s eyes. Try to grab their attention by making small movements with your hands: this can help grab people’s attention and they will look at you.”

Fernando, Cochlear™ Nucleus® System recipient

Hear now. And always

Cochlear is dedicated to helping people with moderate to profound hearing loss experience a world full of hearing. As the global leader in implantable hearing solutions, we have helped more than 700,000 people of all ages to hear and connect with life's opportunities.

We aim to give people the best lifelong hearing experience and access to next generation technologies. We collaborate with leading clinical, research and support networks to advance hearing science and improve care.

That's why more people choose Cochlear than any other hearing implant company.

www.cochlear.com

1. Jackson, D. D., Watzlawick, P., Bavelas, J. B. (2014). Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes. United Kingdom: W. W. Norton, Incorporated.
2. Improving Understanding with Communication Strategies (What to do when you don't understand), Susan Binzer, November 2010, produced by Cochlear Ltd (FUN2041 ISS1 NOV10).

Please seek advice from your health professional about treatments for hearing loss. Outcomes may vary, and your health professional will advise you about the factors which could affect your outcome. Always follow the directions for use. Not all products are available in all countries. Please contact your local Cochlear representative for product information.

Cochlear™ Nucleus® implant systems are intended for the treatment of moderately severe to profound hearing loss. Baha implant systems are intended for the treatment of moderate to profound hearing loss Cochlear, Hear now. And Always, the elliptical logo, True Wireless, Nucleus, ForwardFocus*, Kanso and Baha are either trademarks or registered trademarks of Cochlear group of companies.