



# A Journey into the World of Hearing Loss

By Lois Johnson

(as told to Hearing Loss Magazine)

**L**ois Johnson is a native New Yorker born and raised in the South Bronx and has lived in Huntsville, Alabama, and Wiesbaden, Germany. She has lived in Texas for the past 28 years, raising a family, furthering her education, and learning how to live with hearing loss, and in turn, helping others do the same.

For the past 20 years, Lois has suffered from Meniere's disease, a disorder of the inner ear that can affect hearing and balance to varying degrees. It is characterized by episodes of dizziness and tinnitus and progressive hearing loss, usually in one ear. It is named after the French physician Prosper Ménière who first reported that vertigo was caused by inner ear disorders in an article published in 1861. The condition affects people differently; it can range in intensity from being a mild annoyance to a chronic, lifelong disability.

Lois is soft-spoken but don't let that fool you. She is the epitome of the expression "still waters run deep." She is a stalwart in Texas, working on behalf of people with hearing loss. However, when asked how she has survived hearing loss, a heart attack, and a hurricane, she says, "I have three wonderful kids (and two grandkids) who have been such a great help to me in this past year and a half—and have been very supportive during my journey into the world of hearing loss."

## **Lois, tell us about your journey into hearing loss.**

My journey began as a harrowing medical experience, especially when trying to get a diagnosis. At age 38 I started having migraines, vertigo and tinnitus. After seeing a doctor, I was told they could not figure out what was wrong. I started noticing I had difficulty hearing on the phone with my left ear. I also noticed things were sounding different. For example, I asked one of my coworkers if the bell on the microwave was broken as it seemed not to be going off. (I was losing my pitch). I relayed examples of the hearing changes to my doctor. His prescription: he had the nurse wash my ears out with soap and water.

One day I had to work a double shift because my coworker did not show up. After 12 hours I was utterly exhausted and stressed out. On my drive home things started spinning. I put my foot on the brake and sat a few minutes in the middle of the street until I could see well enough to put on the emergency flashers and pull over to the side of the road.

The next day I saw my doctor and explained what happened the night before. I was finally given a referral to an ENT doctor. After a battery of tests, my hearing improved in my left ear. Six months later, my hearing diminished in my right ear.

After several tests and opinions, I was finally diagnosed with Meniere's. I was told that I had a year left of hearing and I needed to prepare for when I could no longer work. When I heard that, I was devastated. I was a single, divorced parent raising three children on my own and definitely needed to work to support them.

When I first started losing my hearing, I was a librarian in the public library. The staff I worked with and the community were very supportive and accommodating of my hearing loss. They helped me out in every way they could. The staff typed notes on the computer for me. The patrons wrote notes to me. Everyone knew that I could give them what they needed if they could get me to understand what they were saying. I have found that staff in public libraries are very understanding when it comes to people with disabilities. The only drawback with my job in the public library was that I worked nights and weekends and I made very little money.

I decided to go back to school and get my master's degree in Library Science from Sam Houston State University in Texas. Half way through graduate school I decided to change from my perfectly great job as a public librarian to become a school librarian.

I changed jobs to work as a school librarian because of higher pay and more practical work hours. My students were learning and becoming very involved with

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literature, research and technology. Again, I had a great rapport with the teaching staff and students. I was always there to give them the information they needed and lend them a helping hand. Many of the accommodations I needed I had to find for myself.

Ten years later I lost all of my hearing in my right ear, my 'good' ear. I took off my hearing aid to use the phone. I woke up Christmas morning to what I thought was the alarm clock. I later realized as the ringing sound got louder that it was tinnitus.

After three months of waiting for my hearing to return, I went to the doctor. He confirmed what I already knew—that my hearing was probably not coming back. I was evaluated for a cochlear implant and finally decided to have one nine months later. This was the best thing to happen since losing my hearing. I was able to hear and understand speech as soon as the speech processor was activated.

### **How did you hear about the Hearing Loss Association of America?**

I first found out about HLAA (then called Self Help for Hard of Hearing People—SHHH) in a lipreading class, shortly after losing my hearing. The audiologist teaching the class was an SHHH member and she gave me some helpful articles from the *Hearing Loss Journal* (now *Hearing Loss Magazine*). One which I particularly remember was an article about recruitment, which helped me when I was being fitted for a hearing aid.

I was going to school at the time and was unable to attend the local Houston HLAA Chapter meetings. Later, when I finally was able to attend, I was so amazed at how

I could finally enjoy going to meetings because of how well I could hear through the loop system. After joining the chapter I became the secretary and since then have served as co-president, vice-president, and volunteered for a few committees. In 2000, I became the first state director of our newly-formed Texas State Office. After that I served as east Texas state co-coordinator and now I am back in the position of Texas state director.

### **My First Convention—Cedar Rapids, Iowa 1991**

I met such wonderful people from the moment that I got off the plane. As luck would have it, I bumped into two people at the airport who would become my favorite convention friends—the "sisters," Helen and Manell. We shared a cab to the hotel and shared Christmas cards for years. My new friends, the sisters, introduced me to everyone at the national office and practically everyone at the convention.

The first person I met while picking up my registration packet was Rocky Stone, our founder. He never forgot who I was even when he lost his vision. He was a truly great man. Another memorable person who I met was Barbara Kelley, editor. I also met several Texas people, Barbara Hunter and Tommie Wells; who both, I believe, received an award that year. I was so amazed at being able to enjoy all the workshops because I could read as well as hear every word being spoken.

Through attending the conventions I have met so many truly life-long friends. Their friendships have continued long after the conventions ended.

*It is no surprise that Lois has attended every HLAA Convention since 1991. She can be reached at [ettalois@sbcglobal.net](mailto:ettalois@sbcglobal.net).*

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## **Resources**

[www.menieres.org](http://www.menieres.org)

[www.menieresinfo.com](http://www.menieresinfo.com)

[www.earsurgery.org/meniere.html](http://www.earsurgery.org/meniere.html)

# FEMA's Are You Ready? Guide on Hurricanes

FEMA—Federal Emergency Management Agency,  
United States Department of Homeland Security  
<http://www.fema.gov/areyouready/hurricanes.shtml>

## Take Protective Measures

### **Before a Hurricane**

To prepare for a hurricane, you should take the following measures:

- Make plans to secure your property. Permanent storm shutters offer the best protection for windows. A second option is to board up windows with 5/8" marine plywood, cut to fit and ready to install. Tape does not prevent windows from breaking.
- Install straps or additional clips to securely fasten your roof to the frame structure. This will reduce roof damage.
- Be sure trees and shrubs around your home are well trimmed.
- Clear loose and clogged rain gutters and downspouts.
- Determine how and where to secure your boat.
- Consider building a wind-safe room.

### **During a Hurricane**

If a hurricane is likely in your area, you should:

- Listen to the radio or TV for information.
- Secure your home, close storm shutters, and secure outdoor objects or bring them indoors.
- Turn off utilities if instructed to do so. Otherwise, turn the refrigerator thermostat to its coldest setting and keep its doors closed.
- Turn off propane tanks. Avoid using the phone, except for serious emergencies.
- Moor your boat if time permits.
- Ensure a supply of water for sanitary purposes such as cleaning and

flushing toilets. Fill the bathtub and other large containers with water.

You should evacuate under the following conditions:

- If you are directed by local authorities to do so. Be sure to follow their instructions.
- If you live in a mobile home or temporary structure—such shelters are particularly hazardous during hurricanes no matter how well fastened to the ground.
- If you live in a high-rise building—hurricane winds are stronger at higher elevations.
- If you live on the coast, on a floodplain, near a river, or on an inland waterway.
- If you feel you are in danger.

If you are unable to evacuate, go to your wind-safe room. If you do not have one, follow these guidelines:

- Stay indoors during the hurricane and away from windows and glass doors.
- Close all interior doors—secure and brace external doors.
- Keep curtains and blinds closed. Do not be fooled if there is a lull; it could be the eye of the storm —winds will pick up again.
- Take refuge in a small interior room, closet, or hallway on the lowest level.
- Lie on the floor under a table or another sturdy object.

### **FEMA's Basic Disaster Supplies for Your Go Kit**

There are six basics:

#### **1. Water**

- Keep a three-day supply
- Store at least one gallon per person per day
- Check for the expiration dates of bottled water

#### **2. Food**

- Store at least a three-day supply of non-perishable food
- Select foods that require no refrigeration, preparation or cooking and little or no water
- Select food items that are compact and lightweight
- Avoid foods that will make you thirsty
- Choose salt-free crackers, whole grain cereals, and canned foods with high liquid content

#### **3. First aid supplies**

- Assemble a first aid kit for your home and one for each car
- Contact your local American Red Cross chapter to obtain a basic first aid manual

#### **4. Clothing, bedding and sanitation supplies**

- If you live in a cold climate, you must think about warmth. It is possible that you will not have heat; include at least one complete change of clothing and footwear per person
- Toilet paper, soap, liquid detergent, personal hygiene items, etc.

## 5. Tools

- Mess kits, or paper cups, plates and plastic utensils
- Portable, battery-operated radio (even if you can't hear, your neighbors can help!)
- Portable, battery-operated television and extra batteries
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- Cash or traveler's checks, change
- Non-electric can opener, utility knife

## 6. Special items

- Medications
- Supplies for pets or service animals

Check all supplies periodically for expiration date and clothing to make sure it's appropriate for the season.

Find out about these kits in more detail at: <http://www.fema.gov/plan/prepare/basickit.shtml>

## HLAA's Suggested Items for People with Hearing Loss

- PDA, pager, text-enabled cell phone, batteries and car charger
- Portable caption-enabled television and batteries
- Portable TTY and/or phone amplifier and batteries
- Personal assistive listening device, neckloop or headset and batteries
- Extra hearing aids or cochlear implant processor and batteries and/or car charger

## Documentation

If you need to leave in an emergency, you don't want to have to search for important papers. However, we know identity theft is a concern. We suggest keeping a strong box near your Go Kit with copies of the items you think important. Here are a few documents you could include:

- Insurance policies (health, car, home)
- Deeds and property records
- Immunization records

- Birth and marriage certificates
- Driver's license
- Social Security card
- Passport
- Will
- Bank and credit card account numbers
- Stocks and bonds
- Audiogram
- Make and model of your hearing aid and/or cochlear implant

## Resources

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)  
[www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov)

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)  
[www.noaa.gov](http://www.noaa.gov)

National Weather Service  
[www.nws.noaa](http://www.nws.noaa.gov)

American Red Cross  
[www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org) 



[www.sprint800.com](http://www.sprint800.com)

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