

Study: Test children's hearing more often

By Anna Gorman, Los Angeles Times

Parul Bhatia, a pediatrician at Children's Hospital Los Angeles, remembers the patient well. The girl was 3 years old and profoundly deaf. Even though she had failed a hearing test at birth, she hadn't been treated for hearing loss.

Currently, children are only screened at birth and again just before entering kindergarten. Bhatia launched a study to see if there was a way to bridge that gap.

In the three-year study, local children were tested during routine pediatric visits at the Venice Family Clinic and at clinics run by AltaMed Health Services Corp. Of nearly 2,000 children screened, 10 percent failed initial screening in at least one ear and five had permanent hearing loss.

Bhatia said the study, which was published in the January issue of the Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, highlighted the importance of doing periodic screening and showed that such tests could identify more children and lead to earlier intervention.

"These are critical years for language and communication development," she said. If the hearing loss isn't found until the child is 4 or 5 years old, she said, "it is much harder to catch up at that point."

The equipment costs on average about \$5,000 and the screening takes less than 10 minutes. The costs can be recuperated in about a year, she said.

The study was conducted in collaboration with Children's Hospital Los Angeles, the Saban Research Institute, the John

Tracy Clinic and the UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine.

Bhatia's initial patient is now 10, has cochlear implants and is doing well, she said.