

# Better Hearing



## Managing hearing loss

**Advice for older people**

Endorsed by

**RNID • )))**

Changing the world for deaf  
and hard of hearing people

## Help the Aged produces a range of free advice leaflets for older people

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Leaflets are free of charge and available from the Information Resources Team at the address on the back page, email [advicelaflets@helptheaged.org.uk](mailto:advicelaflets@helptheaged.org.uk) or fax: 0870 770 3282.

The information in this leaflet is endorsed by RNID and is correct at the time of printing in February 2006.

If you would like this leaflet in another format, such as large print or audio tape, please contact the Information Resources Team on **020 7278 1114**.

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**It's easy to take good hearing for granted. You probably know what it's like to have 'blocked' ears with a bad cold – everything sounds muffled and you may have to ask people to repeat things. Fortunately, hearing usually returns to normal after a cold.**

**But, like many people, you might find it harder to hear as you get older. Gradual hearing loss is a natural part of ageing although you may not notice it until you are in your 60s or 70s. More than half the people over the age of 60 have some sort of hearing loss. But surprisingly most people who could benefit from a hearing aid don't have one.**

**Are you wondering if your hearing is as good as it used to be?** Here is a checklist to help you decide. If you answer 'yes' to any of the following questions, you may have a hearing loss.

- Do you have to turn up the television or radio more than you used to, or does your family complain that the sound is too loud?
- Does it seem like people are mumbling, rather than speaking clearly?
- Do you often find yourself asking people to repeat things?
- Do you find it difficult to hear at social gatherings, in places of worship, or when there is some background noise, even though other people manage to have conversations?
- Do you ever have difficulty hearing the doorbell or telephone ring, or hearing people on the telephone?
- Do you ever miss your name being called, for example, at the doctor's surgery?

## **What do you do if you think you have a hearing loss?**

Tell your GP your concerns about your hearing. Make a list of situations where you have had difficulty hearing. There could be many different reasons why you aren't hearing as well as you used to. There may be a build-up of wax in your ears or an infection that your GP can treat.

However, if your GP can find no obvious cause for your hearing loss, they will refer you to the audiology clinic or ear, nose and throat (ENT) department of your local hospital to have hearing tests. If you are over 60, your GP may refer you directly to the audiology department so you won't have to go to ENT first.

After the hearing tests, the audiologist will explain your test results and discuss whether hearing aids are likely to help you, or if you could have some other form of treatment. If the audiologist says you need hearing aids, it is a good idea to try them. You may find that you get on better with two – one for each ear. You can get free hearing aids on the NHS.

You can try RNID's telephone hearing check by phoning 0845 600 55 55 (local rate). This will give you an indication of whether you have a hearing loss. If it appears that there is some level of hearing loss, you will be advised to go to your GP.

## **What do hearing aids do?**

A hearing aid makes sounds louder so that you can hear them. It is battery-operated and you put it in or around your ear. Hearing aids are available in different shapes, sizes and types. However, all hearing aids work in a similar way. The type of hearing aid you get will depend on your hearing loss and what you find comfortable.

A hearing aid will not give you perfect hearing, but it will make sounds louder and may help you to hear on the telephone and make conversations easier.

There are many different models of hearing aid for all types of hearing loss. Hearing aids are available either through the National Health Service (NHS), or privately from a hearing aid dispenser.

## Different types of hearing aids

There are a number of different types of hearing aids to choose from, although not all will necessarily be suitable for you.

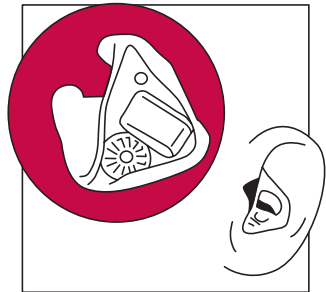
### Behind-the-ear (BTE)

These types of aids are available both through the NHS and privately. They are worn with an earmould made especially for you, which feeds sounds into your ear and keeps the hearing aid in place, over or behind your ear. There are models of BTE hearing aids to suit nearly all types and degrees of hearing loss.



### In-the-ear (ITE) and in-the-canal (ITC)

These hearing aids have their working parts in the earmould so the whole aid fits into your ear. They tend to need repairing more often than BTE aids. Some ITE aids can be seen from the side. The smallest ITC aids fit right inside your ear canal, where they cannot be seen. If you have severe hearing loss, small ear canals or trouble using small controls, these aids may not suit you.



## Body-worn aids

Body-worn aids have a box about the size of a matchbox, which you clip to your belt or pocket, with a lead connecting it to an earphone and earmould. They are the most powerful hearing aids available and may be more suitable for people with sight problems and/or problems using their hands.

## Digital hearing aids

Digital hearing aids can be BTE or ITE and can look just like analogue hearing aids, but they process sound using a tiny computer inside the aid. This means they can be customised to suit your individual hearing loss. They also process sounds to suit various situations – many adjust automatically. Some digital hearing aids are designed to reduce steady kinds of background noise such as the rumble of traffic or the whirr of a fan. You can now get digital hearing aids on the NHS for free or buy them privately.

## How much help will I get from hearing aids?

**A hearing aid will not give you perfect hearing, but it will make sounds louder and may help you to hear on the telephone.**

After you first get a hearing aid, you will need to gradually build the amount of time you wear the aid so that you can get used to the new sounds and the feeling of wearing it in your ear. It may be two to three months before you are able to wear a hearing aid for most of the day comfortably. If you are having any problems with your hearing aid, you should always return to the person who supplied you with the aid for further advice.

Public places such as theatres and stations often have ‘loop’ systems fitted. Loop systems can help you to hear what is being said on stage, or spoken into the counter microphone through

your hearing aid, without picking up background noise. You may see a sign like this one, which indicates that a loop system is fitted. All public phones are also fitted with a tiny loop.



You can only use a loop if you are able to switch your hearing aid to the 'T' setting. Almost all NHS aids have this setting, but some aids bought privately do not. Remember to check this if you are buying an aid. If you don't wear a hearing aid, you can still use a loop, but you will need a hand-held, battery-operated listening device that has a loop listening facility.

## How to get hearing aids

You can get hearing aids free from the NHS or you can buy them from a private hearing aid dispenser. You should always visit your GP first if you think you have a hearing loss, even if you are thinking of buying a hearing aid privately.

RNID produces useful factsheets on digital hearing aids and the NHS hearing aid service. See later for contact details.

Although the current NHS range can cater for most types of hearing loss, there are more models available privately.

## Obtaining NHS hearing aids

It is a good idea to make a special visit to your GP to discuss any concerns about your hearing.

Ask your GP to refer you to an ENT specialist or hearing aid clinic. Arrangements differ slightly from one area to another, and waiting times also vary. Most GPs will be happy to refer you, once



they have examined your ears and checked that they can't offer treatment. If you are over 60, your GP may be able to refer you straight to an audiology or hearing aid clinic without seeing an ENT specialist.

Once the earmould is ready you will be fitted with the hearing aid. Hearing aids, batteries, repairs and servicing will all be provided free of charge. Contact the hearing aid department if you have any problems using your aid. They may be able to adjust the aid, change it for a different model or advise you about getting used to it.

## Buying hearing aids

If you decide to buy a hearing aid you should ask your GP or a friend to recommend a private hearing aid dispenser.

All dispensers must be registered with the **Hearing Aid Council (HAC)** and have to follow the HAC Code of Practice. However, services do vary, so you need to be careful in your choice of dispenser. If you have any problems with an aid you have bought privately, first talk to the dispenser who sold you the aid. If you are still unhappy you might want to contact the Hearing Aid Council about your concerns.

If you decide to buy an aid, the following tips may help.

- **Do** use a dispenser who has been recommended by a friend or your GP.
- **Do** use a dispenser who is based locally.
- **Do** take a friend or relative who has good hearing with you.
- **Don't** buy hearing aids at an exhibition, or on the 'spur of the moment'. If you are considering buying hearing aids privately, book an appointment with a dispenser in advance.

- **Do** make sure that you get a money back guarantee with enough time (at least 28 days) to try the aids and decide whether you want to keep them. You need to use them in a variety of situations to see whether they really help you. Each hearing aid can cost between £595 and £3,000, so you need to be sure that what you buy is right for you.
- **Do** read any document you are asked to sign carefully. By signing an agreement to buy an aid, you are entering into a legal contract. If you are unsure about anything in the contract, don't sign! RNID's factsheet, 'Buying a Hearing Aid?', gives more information on this. See page 14 for details.

## Choosing hearing aids

Most people need some guidance when getting hearing aids. RNID publishes a free leaflet called 'The facts: hearing aids' which answers some of the most common queries.

Here are a few points that you may wish to think about when you are deciding what sort of hearing aids you might want.

- You may wonder whether to buy an aid or get one through the NHS. Many people choose to get their first aid through the NHS, especially if they are happy to use a behind-the-ear aid, the usual type supplied. In some areas, however, you may have to wait a long time for your appointment for a NHS aid, and you may wish to get your hearing aid more quickly.
- Remember that there is a range of NHS aids. If the first aid you are fitted with is not quite as helpful as you'd hoped, you should return to the hearing aid department. The staff may be able to adjust your aid or change it for a different model.

- Remember that in-the-ear hearing aids can be fiddly to adjust, because of the very small controls. If you have arthritis in your fingers, or poor sight, this could be a problem for you. On the other hand, in-the-ear aids are usually easy to insert in your ear.
- Be aware that the claims made in some hearing aid advertisements can be misleading. Be especially cautious about claims that a particular hearing aid will cure the problems of unwanted background noise. This still remains the major problem for hearing aid manufacturers and users, although some hearing aids have special features to help with this.
- If you decide to buy an aid, you can expect it to last around five to seven years. But, of course, if your hearing gets worse, you may need to replace the aid with a more powerful model, which you will have to buy. You will also have to pay for batteries and repairs.
- Owning a private hearing aid does not affect your right to a NHS aid.

## Other helpful equipment

Some people with a hearing loss use special equipment as well as their hearing aids. Special equipment can help you to hear particular sounds around the home. For example, maybe you have difficulty hearing the telephone and doorbell. Or perhaps you can only hear the television or radio if the volume is turned up very high.

### Television and radio

You can get specially designed equipment to make the sound from your television and radio louder. Or you could use a home loop system together with your hearing aid.

### Telephones

Telephones often have a volume button so you can increase the loudness of the caller's voice. Some are fitted with an 'inductive coupler' – a small loop which can be used by hearing aid users who have a 'T' switch on their aid. More information is given in the RNID factsheet 'Telephones'.

### Doorbells

If you have difficulty hearing your doorbell, there is equipment that will make your doorbell louder. There are also vibrating pads and flashing lights that let you know somebody is at your door.

### Where to get special equipment

This type of equipment is often available on free loan through your local social services department. Ask to speak to the social worker for deaf people. If you prefer to buy the equipment yourself, contact RNID for information.

## Lipreading

Lipreading is a skill that most people use without realising to some degree. We usually focus on another person's face and lips if we are having difficulty hearing what they are saying (often because of background noise). We do this in an attempt to search for visual clues that will help us work out what the speaker is saying.

If you have a hearing loss, lipreading can be a very useful aid to hearing. Going to a local lipreading class may improve your skills, and your confidence. Find out about local classes through your library, RNID or Hearing Concern.

## Useful addresses

### RNID

19–23 Featherstone Street  
London EC1Y 8SL  
Tel: 0808 808 0123 (freephone)  
Text: 0808 808 9000 (freephone)  
Fax: 020 7296 8199  
Email: [informationline@rnid.org.uk](mailto:informationline@rnid.org.uk)  
Web: [www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)

RNID is the largest charity working to change the world for the 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK. As a membership charity, it aims to achieve a radically better quality of life for deaf and hard of hearing people. It does this by campaigning and lobbying vigorously, by raising awareness of deafness and hearing loss, by providing services and through social, medical and technical research.

### Hearing Concern

95 Gray's Inn Road  
London WC1X 8TX  
Helpline (Telephone and Text): 0845 0744 600 (local rate)  
Web: [www.hearingconcern.org.uk](http://www.hearingconcern.org.uk)

Hearing Concern is a national voluntary organisation which provides advice and information, campaigns on behalf of its client group, and promotes awareness of the problems faced by deaf and hard of hearing people. They have a network of local advisers who can do home visits.

### Hearing Aid Council

Witan Court, 305 Upper Fourth Street  
Milton Keynes MK9 1EH  
Tel: 01908 235700  
Fax: 01908 233770  
Web: [www.thehearingaidcouncil.org.uk](http://www.thehearingaidcouncil.org.uk)

# Contacting our Services

## Information and advice

**Care fees** Call 0500 76 74 76 (freephone) or use the form in [www.helptheaged.org.uk](http://www.helptheaged.org.uk)

**Benefits, care and housing options** In Britain, call SeniorLine (0808 800 6565 or, in Northern Ireland, 0808 808 7575).

**Equity release/home reversion/home income plans** Call 0845 2300 820.

**Wills and legacies** Call 020 7239 1965 for our free will information pack or to arrange a visit from a specialist advisor.

**Employment and job skills** Call the Third Age Employment Network on 020 7843 1590.

## Home support

**Home security and fire safety devices** Call the HandyVan service on 01255 473999.

**Immediate-response/monitoring service (24-hour)** to help protect people living alone. Call SeniorLink, 01255 473999.

**Gifted housing** Support service to help people stay independent in their own homes. Call 01225 447800.

## Quality of life

**Transport** Our SeniorMobility scheme helps voluntary groups provide transport in their communities. Call 020 7239 1825.

**Home shopping** Items to make everyday living easier, safer, more comfortable and more enjoyable. For a catalogue, call 0876 776 0442.

**Insurance** Travel and motor\* insurance services with no age barriers; also home and pet insurance. Call 0800 41 31 80.

## Help in a crisis

**SeniorLink** 24-hour immediate-response service (England, Scotland and Wales). Call 01255 473999.

**CareLine** (Northern Ireland). Call 02890 230 666.

\*Motor insurance is not available to Northern Ireland residents

Help the Aged produces 24 free advice leaflets (see inside for full list). These are available from the Information Resources Team at the address below, email [adviceleaflets@helptheaged.org.uk](mailto:adviceleaflets@helptheaged.org.uk) or fax: 0870 770 3282.

February 2006

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## Fighting for disadvantaged older people in the UK and overseas,

### WE WILL:

**COMBAT POVERTY** wherever older people's lives are blighted by lack of money, and cut the number of preventable deaths from hunger, cold and disease

**REDUCE ISOLATION** so that older people no longer feel confined to their own home, forgotten or cut off from society

**CHALLENGE NEGLECT** to ensure that older people do not suffer inadequate health and social care, or the threat of abuse

**DEFEAT AGEISM** to ensure that older people are not ignored or denied the dignity and equality that are theirs by right

**PREVENT FUTURE DEPRIVATION** by improving prospects for employment, health and well-being so that dependence in later life is reduced

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