



The facts

What you need to know
about hearing aids

RNID •)))

Changing the world for deaf
and hard of hearing people

We're RNID, the charity working to change the world for the UK's 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people.

www.rnid.org.uk

This leaflet is for you if you think you may need a hearing aid. It will also help you if you have just got your first hearing aid and want to know more about it.

You should read this leaflet if you want to know:

- how hearing aids work
- how to get a hearing aid on the NHS or privately
- different types of hearing aid
- how to use and look after your hearing aid
- what to do if your hearing aid isn't working properly.

This leaflet will answer these questions. And if you need more help, our free Information Line can give you even more information about hearing aids (see back cover for contact details).



What is a hearing aid?

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. We tell you more about different types of hearing aid later.

How does a hearing aid work?

Very simply, they all have a built-in microphone that picks up sound. This sound is processed electronically and made louder, either by analogue circuits, or digitally.

The resulting 'signals' are then passed to a receiver, or earphone, in the hearing aid, where they are converted back into sounds for you to hear.

Will a hearing aid give me perfect hearing?

No it won't. But it will make sounds louder and may help you to hear on the telephone and make conversations easier. This should increase your confidence when talking to other people. However, it won't necessarily make sounds perfectly clear.

If you use a hearing aid a lot, it will not make your hearing worse. If you have tinnitus – hissing, buzzing or other noises in your ears or head – you may hear it less when you use a hearing aid. See page 19 for our range of leaflets and factsheets about hearing aids and tinnitus.

It takes time to get used to a hearing aid. After you first get a hearing aid, you will need to gradually build up 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. Eventually you should be able to wear it for most of the day comfortably. This may take about two

to three months, so you will need to be patient. When you get your hearing aid, you should be given advice on how to get the best from it. You should also be shown how to use it and look after it. You can always ask for more help.

How can I get a hearing aid?

In the UK you can get a hearing aid free of charge on the NHS or buy it privately. But 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. You need to get your ears and hearing checked to make sure you do have a hearing loss and to see if a hearing aid will help. Your hearing difficulty may need medical investigation and treatment.

How do I get a hearing aid on the NHS?

First, visit your GP. They will refer you to an ear, nose and throat (ENT) consultant or an audiologist at a local hospital. At the hospital they will examine your ears and ask about your medical history, including any deafness in your family.



What happens next?

You will be seen by an audiologist who will test your hearing using an 'audiometer'. This produces sounds with differing frequencies (pitch) and levels of loudness. The audiologist will ask you which sounds you can hear. The results are shown on a chart called an audiogram. The audiologist will use this to see if a hearing aid will help you and how it should be set.

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.

How long will I have to wait for a hearing aid?

If you want an NHS hearing aid you may have to wait several weeks or even months for a first appointment. After that you will have to wait again, for a few weeks, before you have your aid fitted.

Can I choose the sort of aid I want?

You cannot always choose the style of hearing aid you want. However, the NHS does have a range of hearing aids, and you should be able to get one that suits your particular hearing loss.

Some hospitals may offer you a hearing aid for each ear, although policy about this varies. If you are offered two, it is a good idea to try them, as many people find two aids more helpful than one.

How is a hearing aid fitted?

The NHS generally fits behind-the-ear (BTE) hearing aids. These have an earmould connected to the main part of the hearing aid. There are also some other, smaller types of earpiece, which can be used instead of an earmould. We will explain this when we describe different types of hearing aid (page 10). The audiologist will usually take an impression of your ear to make a snug-fitting earmould. You will be asked to return to the hospital to get your new hearing aid a few weeks later when the earmould is ready. The audiologist will adjust your hearing aid to suit you and show you how to use and look after it.

If you have a digital hearing aid, you may be asked to come back to have it fine-tuned when you have tried it out in different situations. You should always be given a follow-up appointment within three months to discuss how you are getting on with your hearing aid.

If you have problems with your aid(s) in between appointments, contact your audiology department as you may be able to attend a repair session.

How long do hearing aids last?

Hearing aids last on average about five years. If you need a more powerful hearing aid or a new one, you will not have to pay for it. NHS hearing aids are free. So are new earmoulds, tubing, batteries and, normally, repairs. However, if you lose or damage your hearing aid, you may be asked to pay something towards the repair or replacement.

Can I buy my own hearing aid?

Yes – ask your GP or a friend if they can recommend a private hearing aid dispenser. By law, all hearing aid dispensers must be qualified – or in supervised training – and registered with the Hearing Aid Council. This regulates dispensers' training and conduct, and handles complaints. Our Information Line (see back cover) can give you a list of hearing aid dispensers in your area, **but cannot recommend one.**

In some ways, getting your hearing aid privately is similar to getting one from the NHS. You will have your hearing tested and your hearing aid dispenser will show you how to use and look after your aid. But you also have to sign a contract agreeing to buy your hearing aid. Make sure you read the terms and conditions of this contract and find out about any money-back guarantee before you have your hearing test. Ideally, you should get at least 28 days to try out the hearing aid and be able to return it during this time if you are not satisfied with it, and get a refund.

Can I choose the style I want?

Some people prefer to buy a hearing aid privately so that they can choose the style they want. Some types of hearing aid – such as in-the-ear aids – are not available on the NHS.

How long will I have to wait?

Your hearing aid dispenser will probably see you within a week and you will be able to get your hearing aid within about two weeks.

How much do aids cost?

Hearing aids cost between £300 and £2,500 each. Medical insurance may cover part of the cost of a hearing aid, but check with your insurer first. When the guarantee runs out, you will also have to pay for repairs and the costs of this can mount up. You will also have to buy your own batteries. Hearing aids last about five years on average so remember that you will have to pay for new ones in the future.

You should also insure your hearing aid against loss, theft or damage if you buy it privately.

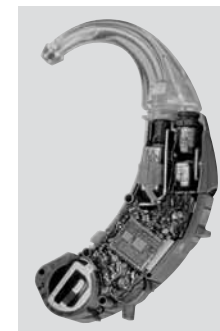


What does analogue and digital mean?

Hearing aids are described as analogue or digital, depending on the technology they use to process sound. Digital hearing aids are the newest kind of hearing aid. They are now available on the NHS in England and Wales and should be available across Scotland and Northern Ireland by 2007.

What are digital hearing aids?

Digital hearing aids look just like modern analogue hearing aids, but they are different because they process sound digitally using a tiny computer inside the aid. This makes it possible to process and customise sounds very precisely to suit your hearing loss. You can then listen to sound comfortably, whatever the pattern of your hearing loss. Many digital aids can be programmed with different settings for different sound environments that you can select at the touch of a button. Some adjust themselves automatically.



Can digital hearing aids help in noisy places?

One of the biggest problems for people with hearing aids is following what someone is saying in noisy places. Many digital hearing aids are designed to reduce steady kinds of background noise such as the rumble of traffic or the whirr of a fan. This makes listening more comfortable, though it does not necessarily help you pick out one voice when many people are talking.

To help with this problem, many digital hearing aids use directional microphones to help you hear sounds best when they are directly in front of you so that you can focus on what you want to listen to.

Can they help with whistling and squeaking?

Some digital hearing aids are also designed to whistle or squeak less than analogue aids (see page 15 for more information about problems with hearing aids).

What are the different types of hearing aid?

The following types of aid are available as digital or analogue – except for body-worn and bone conduction aids which are analogue only. Your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser will advise you on the most suitable type for you.



Behind-the-ear (BTE) hearing aids usually have an earmould, which sits inside your ear. The hearing aid rests behind your ear and a plastic tube connects it to the earmould. They are the most common types of hearing aid and most people who get NHS hearing aids have one of these.

BTE hearing aids with 'open fitting' have a small, soft earpiece at the tip of the tubing instead of an earmould. They are less noticeable than hearing aids with earmoulds but are only suitable if your hearing loss is mild. They give you very natural sound.

In-the-ear (ITE) and **in-the-canal (ITC)** 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 in-the-canal aids fit right inside your ear canal, where they cannot be seen. If you have severe hearing loss, very small ear canals, or have trouble using small fiddly controls, these aids may not suit you.



Body-worn hearing aids have a small box that you clip to your clothes or put in your pocket. This is connected by a lead to an earphone and earmould. Body-worn hearing aids are the most powerful hearing aids available and may be more suitable for people with sight problems and/or problems using their hands.

Bone conduction hearing aids are for people with 'conductive' hearing loss or people who cannot wear a conventional hearing aid. They deliver sound through the skull by vibrations. One type involves a small operation behind the ear.



CROS/BiCROS hearing aids are for people with hearing in one ear only. CROS hearing aids pick up sound from the side with no hearing and feed it to the better ear. BiCROS aids amplify sound from both sides and feed it into the ear that has some hearing.

Useful hearing aid accessories

These include:

- an air-puffer to help dry the earmould and tubing after you have washed them
- special tubing that is less likely to collect moisture (if this is a problem for you)
- earmoulds made with special material if the usual ones irritate your ear
- splash-proof covers for hearing aids (these enclose the whole aid but cannot be made completely watertight)

How can I get the best from my hearing aid?

Once you get your hearing aid, it is important to practise putting it in your ear and using the various controls. This will help you get used to it and get the most from it. Make sure that the earmould fits snugly but comfortably.

It may take several months to get used to your hearing aid. Start by wearing it once or twice a day for about an hour in quiet

situations. Listen to everyday noises such as the kettle boiling or doors opening and shutting to get used to how they sound. Then try conversations with one person, again in a quiet room. Make sure the other person sits facing the light as it will make it easier to lipread them.

Next, try conversations with two people or in small groups. Don't expect to hear everything that is said, but try to follow the conversation. When you have practised using your hearing aid indoors, try using it outside. To start with, be careful not to have the volume too high when you go out because sounds, such as traffic, can be loud.

Finally, try using your hearing aid somewhere where it is noisy such as a restaurant or pub. This is likely to be the most difficult situation. You will probably not be able to hear everything that people say to you, but with time this should get easier.

If you still can't get used to your hearing aid, talk to your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser. They will be happy to give you some tips on how to get the best out of your hearing aid.

What are the controls on a hearing aid?

Some hearing aids have a switch with different positions, often marked 'O' for 'off', 'M' for 'microphone' (the usual setting) and one marked 'T'. You switch other hearing aids on and off by using the battery door. Practise switching on and off and remember to switch the aid off when you are not using it.

Some hearing aids have a volume control wheel and others adjust their own volume automatically. If there is a volume control, practise adjusting the loudness to a comfortable level.

Digital hearing aids often have a switch or button to change to different settings (programmes) suitable for different listening situations.



The 'T' setting

Most hearing aids either have a switch position marked 'T' or, if they are digital, a 'T' listening programme that you can switch to. On the 'T' setting, your hearing aid will be able to pick up sound from listening equipment, such as a loop system (see page 16). This equipment transfers sound direct to your hearing aid, cutting out background noise. When you get your hearing aid, ask if it has a 'T' setting. If it is a very small aid, there may be no room for one. This means that you won't be able to use listening equipment with it.

Batteries

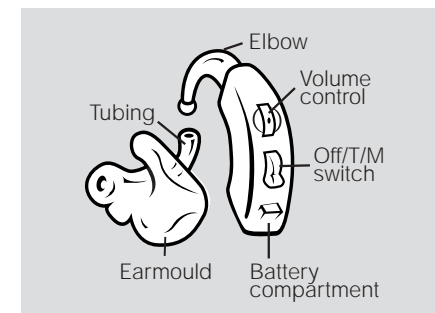
You will have to change the batteries in your hearing aid regularly. If you have an NHS hearing aid, you can get free batteries from any hospital audiology or ENT department that has a battery service. Sometimes you can also get them from your local health centre. You can also buy batteries from any pharmacy.

What's the best way to look after my hearing aid?

When your hearing aid is fitted you should be given written instructions about how to look after it. If you are not sure about any of the information, ask your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser for advice.

Behind-the-ear (BTE) hearing aids

Wipe the hearing aid and earmould with a dry tissue every time you take your hearing aid off. Ideally, you should wash the earmould and tubing every night. If you can't do this, wash them at least once a week. Only wash the earmould and tubing. Do not wash the hearing aid – the part that contains the battery.



Don't unscrew the hooked part (or 'elbow') from the hearing aid. Instead, gently pull the plastic tubing off the hooked 'elbow' but don't pull it out of the earmould. Wash the earmould and tubing together in warm soapy water, and rinse them.

Blow down the tubing to get the water out, and let it dry overnight. Once it is dry, push the end of the tubing back onto the hearing aid. The tubing will need changing every three to six months before it hardens or splits and causes problems.

In-the-ear (ITE) hearing aids

There are two types of ITE hearing aids:

Custom ITE aids have only one part. If you bought an ITE hearing aid privately, it is likely to be a custom one. You must not wash these. Wipe them with a dry tissue and use a soft dry brush to remove wax from the opening. Do not poke anything into the opening as you may damage the earphone. These aids often come with instructions and cleaning tools to help you.

Modular ITE aids have an earmould attached to a hearing aid. You can separate the earmould from the hearing aid and then wash the earmould in soapy water. Wipe the hearing aid part with a dry tissue. Don't ever wash it or get it wet.

In-the-canal (ITC) and completely-in-the-canal (CIC) hearing aids

You must not wash these hearing aids. Wipe them with a dry tissue and use a soft brush to clean wax from the opening. ITC hearing aids often come with special instructions and cleaning tools.

Body-worn hearing aids

If you have this type of hearing aid, wipe it all over with a dry cloth every time you take it out. Wash the earmould at least once a week. First, gently pull the receiver off the earmould. Put the hearing aid (the part with the battery in), lead and receiver in a safe, dry place. Don't ever get these wet.

Wash the earmould with warm soapy water, using a soft brush to remove any wax blocking the opening in the earmould. Rinse and dry the earmould carefully.

Leave it to dry overnight before you clip it back on to the receiver.

Earmoulds

Ask your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser to make a new earmould if it wears out or becomes loose or uncomfortable.

What if my hearing aid doesn't work properly?

If you are having problems with your hearing aid, your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser will be able to help you. However, there are some common problems that you may be able to sort out yourself. Try the suggestions below.

If your hearing aid doesn't seem to be working:

- check that your hearing aid is switched on properly
- check that you have not switched it to the 'T' setting by accident
- make sure that the volume is at the correct level for you and not turned right down
- check that the battery is the right way round
- try putting a new battery in
- if you have a BTE hearing aid, take it out, pull the tubing off the elbow and blow down the tubing to remove any condensation that may have collected and could be blocking the sound
- check that the tubing is not squashed or split
- check that the earmould is not blocked with wax.

Buzzing noises may mean that you have switched your hearing aid to the 'T' setting by accident. However, if this is not the problem, buzzing generally means your hearing aid has developed a fault and needs to be repaired.

Whistling or squeaking is caused by 'feedback'. This happens when sound amplified by your hearing aid is fed back into it. It may happen if:

- you have not put the earmould in properly – push it gently to check
- you have excess wax in your ears – ask your GP to check your ears
- the earmould does not fit your ear closely enough – you'll need to ask for a new one
- you have the volume too high
- the earmould, hooked 'elbow' or tubing in a BTE aid becomes loose or splits. If this is the problem you'll need to get help from your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser.

How else can I improve my hearing?

You can get a range of equipment to help you hear talks, conversations, or audiovisual equipment such as your television or stereo. Some of it is specially designed to be used with hearing aids on their 'T' setting.

- Loop and infrared systems are often fitted in places such as theatres, public halls, post offices and banks. Look out for this sign. You can also fit them at home.
- Telephones described as 'hearing aid compatible' have a kind of built-in loop. When you use this kind of telephone with your hearing aid on the 'T' setting, the sound you hear will be clearer and without background noise.
- You can also use conversation aids, radio microphone systems and listening equipment with your hearing aids by plugging in a neckloop or earloop, and switching your hearing aid to 'T'.



Want to know more?

Make sure you continue to get up-to-date information about deafness, hearing loss and tinnitus by joining RNID.

Our lively, bi-monthly, award-winning magazine, *One in Seven*, is packed full of useful information and advice, including product reviews, reader views and news and events.

How to join

Anyone can be a member, and it costs from £12.50 a year.

To join:

- visit www.rnid.org.uk/join or
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Contact us for more information:

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Tel/textphone **0845 634 0679**

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Card number (Visa/Mastercard/Maestro/CharityCard)

 Issue no

Signature _____ Expiry date ____/____

Please return this form to:

RNID, FREEPOST LON13186, London EC1B 1AL

Occasionally, we may want to let you know about the work we are doing.
If you would prefer not to be contacted in this way please tick this box. Occasionally, we will allow other organisations to contact you, but if you
would prefer not to be contacted, please tick this box. From time to time we would like to contact you by email. Please tick here if
you would like to receive emails from us. 

Where can I get further information?

You might find some of our factsheets useful:

- **Bone-conduction hearing aids** (factsheet)
- **Buying a hearing aid?** (factsheet)
- **Digital hearing aids** (factsheet)
- **Loudness recruitment and hearing aids** (factsheet)
- **NHS hearing aid service** (factsheet)
- **The facts: tinnitus** (leaflet)
- **Complementary therapies and tinnitus** (factsheet)
- **Drugs and tinnitus** (factsheet)
- **Equipment, sound therapy and tinnitus** (factsheet)
- **Low frequency noise** (factsheet)
- **Making a personal injury medical negligence claim if you have tinnitus** (factsheet)
- **Musical hallucinations** (factsheet)
- **Pulsatile tinnitus** (factsheet)
- **Therapies to help you with your tinnitus** (factsheet)
- **Tinnitus and children** (factsheet)
- **Tinnitus and relaxation** (factsheet)
- **Tinnitus and sleep** (factsheet)

Please contact the Information Line for free copies of these. And let us know if you would like any of them – or this leaflet – in Braille, large print or audio format.

We're RNID, the charity
working to change the world
for the UK's 9 million deaf
and hard of hearing people.

There are a number of
ways to find out more

www.rnid.org.uk

Information line

Telephone 0808 808 0123

Textphone 0808 808 9000

Or write to us

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