



HEARING CONCERN FACTSHEET

Getting and using a hearing aid

Do I have a hearing problem?

It is normal for hearing to decline as we get older and this is nothing to be embarrassed about. Do not be put off by the idea of getting a hearing aid, or think it will not make a difference. There are hearing aids to suit most people. If you find you are turning the TV up or asking people to repeat what they say you are right to consider getting a hearing aid. There are 8 million people in Britain who are hard of hearing and over 2 million have hearing aids, so you are not alone.

What should I do if I think I have a hearing problem?

- Firstly, see your doctor. They will examine your ears and do some tests. Sometimes, it can be a simple problem such as too much wax.
- If your doctor thinks a hearing aid would be useful, you will be referred to an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist at your local hospital.
- If there are no obvious complications or you are over 65 years old, your doctor may refer you directly to the audiology department.

What happens when I see the specialist?

The specialist will examine your ears and ask you about your hearing. An audiology technician will test your hearing with an audiometer. This measures the sounds you can hear over a range of frequencies. A record will be charted onto an audiogram, which shows the extent of your hearing loss.

What happens if I need a hearing aid?

The technician will take an impression of your ear so that an individual ear mould can be made. When the ear mould is ready, the technician will choose the right hearing aid from the NHS range for you, show you how to use it, and give you free batteries. You may also have the opportunity to see a hearing therapist. Getting used to your hearing aid takes time and will probably involve more than one visit to the hospital. Many hearing aid departments run a follow-up system. If you do have problems, ask the audiology department for help – or contact the Hearing Concern Help Desk – we may be able to refer you to one of our trained local advisers.

Types of hearing aids

NHS hearing aids

The NHS offer 3 main types of aid: **behind-the-ear, body worn and in-the-ear**. The majority of people are given behind-the-ear (BTE) aids (which are free). Batteries, servicing, repair and replacement aids are also given free of charge. In special cases, your audiologist may agree to provide you with a private aid on the NHS.

Behind the ear aids (BTE)

These aids, often known as post-aural aids, come in two parts: a mould that is worn in the ear and a small plastic unit that fits behind the ear. The two parts are connected by a small piece of plastic tubing. For most people these aids are comfortable to wear and models are available to suit most types and degrees of hearing loss. Different colours are available to match hair tone. The NHS range is beige, dark brown and grey.

Body-worn aids

This is a compact case usually worn on the chest, with a cord connecting the case to an earphone and a mould in the ear. Body-worn aids are usually high powered, but are rare. People with poor sight or arthritis in their fingers can find body-worn aids or hearing aids with a remote control useful because of the size of the controls.

In the ear aids (ITE)

These aids fall into three categories: all-in-the-ear aids, canal aids and completely in the canal aids. The first of these fits entirely in the bowl of the ear, and are now available for those with a severe hearing loss. Canal aids are smaller, fitting into the ear canal, but these can only be considered for mild losses. All types of in-the-ear aids are specially moulded to fit your own ear. Full in-the-ear aids are available on the NHS in special cases.

Other types of aids

Spectacle aids

These are spectacles that have the hearing aid in the arm. They can be used either with a mould that fits into the ear in the normal way, or with a vibrator that rests on the bone behind the ear. Spectacle aids are expensive because both an optician and hearing aid dispenser are involved in making them.

These are suitable for people who wear glasses most of the time. It is not usually possible to have spectacle aids on trial, and if your aid has to be repaired you will lose the use of your spectacles while being repaired (and vice versa). It is possible to have spectacles with hearing aids fitted for both ears, although this will increase the cost significantly.

Disposable Hearing Aids

Disposable aids may be an option for people with mild or moderate hearing loss. Songbird disposable digital aids are now available from Boots Hearingcare centres. You will have to pay for the initial appointment with a hearing aid dispenser and there is a charge for the hearing aids per month. The aids are disposable and there is no need to change batteries or get the aid repaired, and they are less likely to need cleaning. Songbird claims that they will fit 80 per cent of adults' ears. For more information please contact Boots Hearing Care (see contacts).

Digital Hearing Aids

Digital hearing aids are now available from private hearing aid dispensers and some NHS Trusts who are part of the modernisation of the NHS Audiological services. You can get a list of participating trusts from the Hearing Concern HelpDesk. Digital hearing aids work differently to analogue in the way that they convert and process sound as they are the result of the computer revolution and therefore more technically sophisticated. However at this stage it is still unclear whether digital hearing aids are suitable for certain types of hearing loss so Hearing Concern recommends that you always opt for a trial period before agreeing to a sale.

Programmable Hearing Aids

These hearing aids are fitted and programmed by computer to suit your particular hearing loss. They claim to more closely match your hearing loss. Some analogue hearing aids are programmable and all digital aids are programmable.

Using a Private Dispenser

The best way to find a dispenser is to get a recommendation from a friend or doctor. All private hearing aid firms and dispensers must be registered under the Hearing Aid Council Act (1968). This sets out the code of practice to which they are required to conform. It is illegal for anyone not registered to sell hearing aids. Please check that your dispenser is registered with the Hearing Aid Council (see contacts)

A commercial aid may cost from £500 to £2,000+, so be cautious, we always suggest getting a NHS aid first. If however, you find there is likely to be a long delay in getting your NHS aid, you may decide to buy a private aid. We would, however, suggest you also continue with the procedure to obtain a NHS aid, especially if you have chosen a private aid that does not have a "T" Switch.

Although a hearing aid is basically a sound amplifier, the response of a modern hearing aid can be tailored to make up for, or partly compensate for, your particular hearing loss, both at high and low frequencies. Some makers of private aids claim that aids may be programmed to give better reception for music as well as speech.

Some aids use a small hand-held unit, which is an advantage to many users who have problems in using the very small controls on some aids. These sophisticated aids are more expensive than the simpler ones.

If you have never had a hearing aid, you may not know what to expect from it, or what to ask the salesman. Hearing aids should be bought with full and careful consideration, not on impulse or under pressure. Remember too that you will need to pay for batteries, servicing, repairs and insurance if you buy a private aid.

Some useful advice

- Always check that the dispenser is registered with the Hearing Aid Council.
- Shop around and compare prices and services offered by your local dispensers.
- Do not be rushed into buying a hearing aid. They are expensive and require careful consideration.
- Write out a budget of how much you can afford to spend before you consider buying a hearing aid. Remember to include insurance, batteries and any possible repairs.
- Ask for a trial period for the hearing aid, make sure you get the trial time in writing and tell the dispenser about any problems that you may be having. Ask the dispenser how long the hearing aid should last.
- Make sure you get at least one year's guarantee or warranty. The Hearing Aid Council 'Code of Practice', that all dispensers must abide by, requires dispensers to give you written terms and conditions of sale.
- Try and find a local firm. Many companies' stage exhibitions in local halls or hotels, but are based out of the area. A postal service is inadequate for dealing with any problems later on.
- Be wary of sales jargon and exaggerated claims –remember NO hearing aid can eliminate background noise or restore normal hearing.

A list of registered hearing aid dispensers, who are also members of the British Society of Hearing Aid Audiologists (BSHAA) is available on the website at

http://www.hearingconcern.org.uk/advice/hearingaids/adv_haddir.html

We can also post you a printed version. Please contact us, details below.

Getting used to your hearing aid

A common problem that most new hearing aid users experience is background noise. What you want to hear is the person speaking to you or the TV, what you hear with the aid is every sound – the rustle of paper, the hiss of the gas fire, the ticking of the clock, even the sound of traffic passing the house; the aid makes everything louder, which can be irritating.

You will gradually become familiar with different noises. You should be able to identify sounds and ignore those that are unimportant to you.

STEP ONE

Start off gradually

- When you get your new aid, start off gradually, make sure that it feels comfortable and adjust the volume so the sound is as clear as possible but not uncomfortably loud. Wear the aid at home in the living room only for the first few days. Avoid the kitchen and bathroom where there are harsh noises.
- Wear it only for short periods every day at first, but try to increase use a little each day.
- Learn to adjust the volume control of your hearing aid; *You may need to do this many times*. Practice makes perfect.
- In conversation, remind people they should face you, speak clearly and not cover their mouths or speak too quickly.
- Do not try using it when there are a number of people in the room –we'll come to that later.

A few words of advice

Wearing your hearing aid may feel strange at first and your ear may feel "blocked" or "full". This is quite normal. It will take time to get used to it, but it is important that you wear it every day. It is like wearing in a pair of new boots. It takes time before you can wear them out and about. But by increasing use steadily, a little bit every day, you may even forget you are wearing a hearing aid.

Some people find that they like peace and quiet. The new aid has brought so many sounds that you feel tired with concentration. FINE. Take a break. But do persevere the next day and afterwards. Things will get easier the more you practice.

Family and friends can help by identifying sounds that are difficult to recognise, and by being tolerant when you make a mistake.

Watching TV

Try to get a relative or friend to set the volume level on your TV. There are good reasons for this.

- It will help you to adapt better to the aid.
- If the TV is on too loud –and your hearing aid is on low volume (or not at all), then you will probably not hear if the telephone rings or someone comes to your door. If you have teletext, try 888 for subtitles.
- A noisy TV can upset the neighbours!

Tasks

Try adjusting your hearing aid so that without altering the volume of the TV, you can comfortably listen to the programmes. This may take some time and you may need to try several times to get it right. This is all part of the process of learning to use your hearing aid properly.

Family and friends can help

- By checking that the volume level of the TV is normal
- By not chatting too much while watching TV
- By, if necessary, helping you keep track of the action

STEP TWO

Extending the use of the hearing aid

Once you feel confident about using your hearing aid, start to use it in noisier places like the kitchen. You may find the background noises seem harsh because they have little clear meaning.

Given patience, practice and persistence, you will find that background noise is less distracting and you will get more out of your hearing aid.

STEP THREE

Using the aid in small groups of people

Once you have mastered using your hearing aid in the peace of your own home, you can try listening to people in small groups.

A few tips

- Start with a small group of people you know well.
- Try to position yourself so that you can see everyone's face.
- Make sure there is enough lighting.
- Concentrate on the gist of the conversation rather than the individual words.
- Don't be afraid to ask people to repeat things.

STEP FOUR

Using the aid outside

When you are at home, you are able to control most of the noises around you. Outside you can't. Aeroplanes, barking dogs, children shouting, motorcycles and cars – all of these sounds are unexpected and often loud. To cope with them effectively needs skill. Make sure you can adjust the volume to a comfortable level to diminish the level of background noise.

Most of the sounds you notice will be heard by anyone with good hearing. However, you may find sounds of the breeze can be annoying. Turning down your aid down a little may help, or you may have to switch it off in a strong wind.

You might want to consider lipreading classes. You can learn the different lip shapes in speech and how to use the overall patterns to follow what someone is saying. It can boost confidence and you can share experiences and practical tips. Contact the Hearing Concern Helpdesk, your local library or councils for details of classes.

As a car driver

The first time you use your aid when driving, put it in, switch on and adjust as usual. Start the engine but do not drive off. Listen carefully to the sound of the engine when idling and revved up. You may be surprised how different things sound, particularly when you start moving. Road noise will be louder and it may take a little time to get used to.

Induction Coils (Loops)

- An induction coil for use with loop systems and telephones fitted with 'inductive couplers' is included in all NHS analogue hearing aids and some private ones.
- To use this facility, switch the aid to the "T" position (your handbook should explain all the settings on the aid) and you will get a clearer reception with less background noise.
- Most public telephones are fitted with inductive couplers. Otherwise a small amplifier (coupler) can be clipped to the earpiece of a normal telephone, which will allow it to be used with hearing aid set to the "T" position.
- Many public buildings such as theatres and cinemas, banks and post offices are now fitted with induction loops – you can also use a loop at home to improve the clarity of a TV or radio set.

Our booklet on environmental aids gives more details of these facilities.

Using the aid in a meeting or church

Some tips

- Sit near the front so you are close to the speaker.
- Try to see the face of the speaker as you can get clues from the expression on their face (and from gestures).
- At a meeting try to sit next to a friend who can help you, perhaps by writing a little note if you lose the thread of what is going on.
- If your church or hall has a loop system, switch your aid to the "T" setting. You may need to adjust the volume level. Do remember to switch back to the "M" setting if you wish to talk to someone.

Step 5

Using your hearing aid with the telephone

Check there is a setting marked "T" on your hearing aid (all NHS behind-the-ear analogue aids have this setting). You will be able to hear more clearly when using the telephone with an inductive coupler in the earpiece. All current British Telecom (BT) phones for hard of hearing people have this facility, as do some domestic phones. Your local BT office will be able to tell you.

All public payphones are fitted with inductive couplers including emergency motorway phones. Look for the ear symbol on these telephones, which indicates that they are compatible with hearing aids.

Hold the telephone in the usual way, and move the switch on your hearing aid to the "T" position. You may need to adjust the position of the telephone earpiece slightly to get the best sound. Don't forget to turn your aid back to the usual setting once you have finished your conversation.

General Questions on Hearing Aids

Am I entitled to a NHS aid if I have a private one?

Yes. Owning a privately bought hearing aid does not stop you from getting one through the NHS.

Will a hearing aid cure my deafness?

No, but it should, with practice, give you great help. In many cases of hearing loss, there is no medical or surgical cure and a hearing aid is the best form of treatment.

Is it possible to wear a behind-the-ear aid at the same time as glasses?

Yes, usually. Most people find there is room behind your ear to wear both comfortably. If you do experience problems, you could consider getting either spectacle aids or replacing your spectacle side arms with less bulky ones.

Would an “invisible” in-the-ear aid be the easiest and least conspicuous answer to my problem?

It would be if they were small enough to be really invisible and if they gave the performance you require. In fact the smallest type of aid, the “canal aid”, is still visible, and is not suitable for all types of hearing loss. Rather than worrying about whether the hearing aid is visible, ***the most important point is to get a hearing aid that actually helps your hearing.*** Bear in mind that more and more people of all ages are wearing hearing aids, and in time they will become no more unusual than spectacles.

Would it be better if I wore two aids?

In many cases, yes, but it depends on the type of hearing loss. Research has shown that two aids can provide improved speech clarity, particularly in the presence of background noise and may give you a stereo effect and help you find the direction from which the sound is coming.

How long will a hearing aid last?

NHS aids last for about five years or longer with reasonable care. For private hearing aids, ask your dispenser about the average life span of your hearing aid.

How long do the batteries last?

This depends on the type of battery, the type of aid, and how much that aid is used. Zinc air batteries will have a sticker on them - you will have to remove this before you use it. Batteries can cost between £5 and £45+ a year for private hearing aids.

Why do aids sometimes make a whistling sound?

This noise is called ‘feedback’ and is usually caused by either: the mould not being properly inserted into the ear, the volume on the aid being too loud, or wear and tear of the plastic tubing. The tubing will need to be replaced from time to time and this can be done at your local clinic, audiology department or by a Hearing Concern advisor.

What about background noise?

Background noise can make speech difficult to hear in noisy environments. Everyone has difficulties following conversation in noisy places. It is the biggest problem for hearing aid users - especially for those with analogue hearing aids. Although no hearing aid can eliminate background noise completely, directional microphones help in some situations.

But be beware of advertising claiming to cut background noise –many users have told us that these claims are exaggerated. Loop systems help to reduce background noise in public places such as concerts, plays or in public places. This is because the hearing aids microphone is switched off. The loop emits signals that hearing aid users can tune into if they have a T-switch on their aid. This makes sounds clearer and cuts down background noise.

How do I look after my hearing aid?

Do not submerge your aid in water. To clean remove the mould and the tubing and wash separately in warm soapy water. Remove water from the plastic tube by shaking or with a 'puffer' – do not blow into it.

Two million users

Over two million people in the UK use hearing aids –200,000 are given to new users by the NHS every year. They can and do allow each of us to get the best from our hearing.

Unfortunately, many are left in drawer and never used –do persist, if you need help or advice please contact Hearing Concern's Helpdesk or join your local hard of hearing club or lip reading class for support and to meet other hard of hearing people.

Contacts

The Hearing Aid Council (HAC)
Witan Court
305 Upper Fourth Street
Central Milton Keynes
MK9 1EH.
Tel: 01908 235700
Fax: 01908 233770
Website: www.thehearingaidcouncil.org.uk

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