



Help the Aged

Better Hearing

A Help the Aged advice leaflet



In association with

RNID

THE ROYAL NATIONAL
INSTITUTE FOR DEAF PEOPLE

Sponsored by



Community programme

It's easy to take good hearing for granted. But most of us know what it's like to have 'blocked' ears during a bad cold - everything sounds muffled and you may have to ask people to repeat things. Fortunately, most people's hearing returns to normal afterwards.

However, as people grow older, hearing tends to deteriorate naturally, although this is not usually noticeable until you are in your 60s or 70s. More than half of those over 65 years of age have a hearing loss, and usually the problem is due to the ageing process. You may already have friends who are hard of hearing, and you may wonder if you yourself are still hearing quite as well as you used to.

Here is a checklist to help you. If you answer YES to any of the following questions, you may have developed a hearing loss.

- Do you have to turn up the TV or radio more than you used to or does your family complain that the sound is too loud?
 - Do you sometimes wish people would speak clearly, and stop mumbling?
 - Do you ever miss your name being called, for example, at the doctor's surgery?
 - Do you sometimes misunderstand what people say to you or do you 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?
 - Do you have difficulty hearing the doorbell or telephone at any time?
-

WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK YOU MAY HAVE A HEARING PROBLEM

Visit your GP and explain your concern about your hearing. There could be many different reasons why you aren't hearing as well as you used to, so your doctor will need to examine your ears and ask you a few questions to determine what is wrong.

For example, it may just be excessive wax which can be syringed out. Or you may have an infection which can be treated. However, if your GP can find no obvious cause for your hearing problems, s/he will refer you to an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist. If your difficulties are simply due to your age, the specialist will explain that there is no 'cure', and will probably offer you a hearing aid. Do try one - it's likely to be very helpful.

WHAT DOES A HEARING AID DO?

The main purpose of a hearing aid is to amplify sounds (make them louder) so that they are loud enough, but not uncomfortably loud. The amount of amplification you need depends on the type and degree of hearing loss you have. Hearing aids amplify sounds which occur in normal everyday life, but are particularly designed to cope with the sounds that make up speech.

Most sounds are made up of different pitches or 'frequencies'. A hearing aid amplifies these different pitches by different amounts, because when you have a hearing loss, you usually hear some frequencies more easily than others. For older people, it is the high frequencies which are usually more difficult to hear. This is why you might find you can't hear your grandchildren (who have high-pitched voices) whereas you can hear your son or husband (who will have a low-pitched voice). You may often be able to hear the **sound** of speech, but not the actual **words**.

You need to have a hearing aid appropriate for your own hearing loss and this will be selected for you. There is a wide range of models to cater for all needs. Hearing aids are available either through the National Health Service (NHS), or commercially.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF HEARING AID

There are a number of different types of hearing aid to choose from, although not all will necessarily have a model suitable for your own particular needs. Fortunately, gone are the days of large, cumbersome aids with batteries worn around the waist! For many years now, the vast majority of people have been using small aids which are hardly noticeable.

Behind-the-ear aid

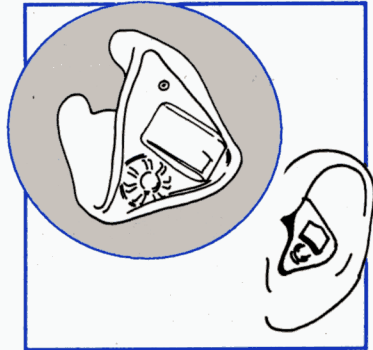
This is the most popular type of aid and is available both through the NHS and commercially. It is worn together with an individually made earmould, which not only feeds the sounds through into the ear but also keeps the actual hearing aid in place. Models to suit nearly all types and degrees of hearing loss are available. Some models can be fitted onto the arm of your spectacles.



In-the-ear aid

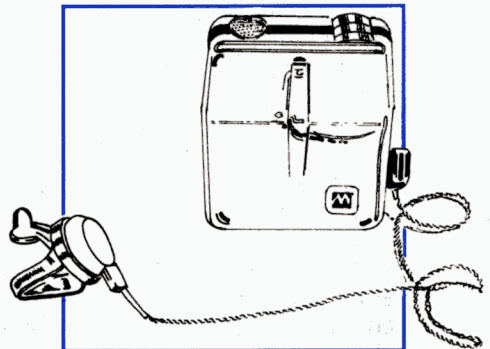
Some people find this type of aid more cosmetically appealing, since it fits entirely into the ear, rather than behind the ear. These aids are individually moulded to fit your own ear.

However, they are not generally available through the NHS and they are not usually suitable if you have a severe hearing loss.



Body-worn aid

Although this type of aid is still available both through the NHS and commercially, it is less commonly used than the behind-the-ear and in-the-ear aids. It comes in the form of a small unit worn on the chest, with a lead connecting the unit to an earphone and earmould. It's more cumbersome than other types of aid but because of its size, it is easier to operate and can provide higher levels of amplification.



Other types of aid

There are a number of other types of aid, which cater for the more unusual types of hearing loss or a specific medical requirement.

The NHS has a range of around 15 hearing aids, nearly all of which are of the behind-the-ear type. The NHS range is bought from the commercial manufacturers and is altered from time to time if the Department of Health feels that different models need to be made available. Although the current NHS range can cater for most types of hearing loss, many more models are available commercially, and for some types of deafness only a commercial aid will provide adequate benefit.

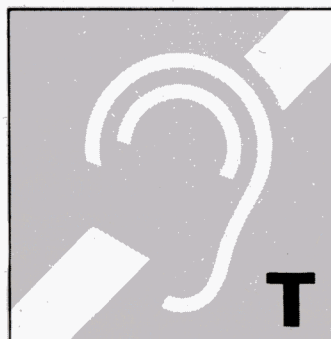
HOW MUCH HELP WILL A HEARING AID GIVE ME?

A hearing aid does not 'restore your hearing to normal' - it is simply an 'aid to hearing', but usually a very good 'aid'!

When you use a hearing aid for the first time, everyday sounds may seem quite loud. It could take a couple of months to get used to hearing sounds in a new way. If you have any problems during this initial period, you should always return to the person who supplied you with the aid.

You will probably find that your hearing aid will be of more benefit in some circumstances than others. You will need to experiment. But remember that hearing aids are at their best when used in quiet surroundings, when you are talking to only one or two people at a time. If there is any other noise present, such as music or other people talking, it will tend to interfere with what you are trying to hear. So if you find you are having difficulties, remember that you will not be alone - most hearing aid users experience similar problems.

'Loop systems' are installed in many public places - theatres, churches, railway ticket offices and in all public phones. Look out for the special signs indicating that the loop system has been installed. A loop system should help you to receive clearer sound through your hearing aid, without picking up unwanted background noise. However, you can only benefit from the loop if you are able to switch your hearing aid to a special 'T' setting - all NHS aids are equipped with this facility, but many commercial aids are not. Remember to check this if you are buying an aid.



HOW TO OBTAIN A HEARING AID

There are two ways of obtaining a hearing aid. You can get one free through the NHS. Or you can buy a hearing aid through a commercial hearing aid dispenser. You may find it helpful to read through the rest of this leaflet before deciding which route to take.

Obtaining an NHS hearing aid

You need to ask your GP to refer you either to an ENT specialist at your local hospital, or to the local hearing aid clinic. Arrangements differ slightly from one area to another. Waiting times may also vary. Most GPs will be quite happy to refer you, once they have examined your ears and checked that they can offer no treatment. But if your GP is reluctant, you may have to ask another GP at the surgery for a referral.

It is a good idea to make a special visit to your GP to discuss your hearing loss, rather than raising it at the end of a consultation about some other health problem, which your doctor may see as more important. Your hearing is very valuable to you - make sure your doctor knows that!

At the ENT department, the consultant will examine your ears and arrange for your hearing to be tested by an audiologist at the hearing aid clinic. If the tests suggest that a hearing aid may help you, an impression of your ear will be taken so that an individual earmould can be made. There will be a further appointment for the hearing aid to be fitted once the earmould is ready. Your hearing aid, batteries, repairs and servicing will all be provided free of charge. Your hearing aid department should encourage you to return if you have any problems.

In some hospitals, it may also be possible to buy a hearing aid. Even if you do buy one, you still have a right to an NHS aid.

Most people find NHS aids very helpful and it is often a good idea to obtain your first hearing aid in this way.

Buying a hearing aid

Hearing aids are sold to the public by hearing aid dispensers, not by the manufacturers. There are several hundred dispensers operating throughout the country, and all must be registered with the Hearing Aid Council (HAC). Although a dispenser will not require a referral from your GP, it is a good idea to ask your GP to examine your ears first, as dispensers are very unlikely to be medically trained. Consulting your GP first would enable any medical problem with your ears to be picked up.

Although all dispensers are registered and all have to follow the HAC Code of Practice, services do vary, so you need to be careful in your choice of dispenser.

If you decide to buy an aid, the following points may be of help.

Do

- use a dispenser who has been recommended by a friend.
- use a dispenser who is based locally.
- arrange an appointment at the dispenser's consulting rooms rather than at your home (unless you are unable to get out).
- take a friend or relative who has good hearing with you.
- make sure that you are able to have the aid for a trial period (preferably 30 days).

Don't

- buy your aid at exhibitions or by replying to hearing aid advertisements.
- have a home visit unless you must.

It is essential to have a trial period before making a decision to buy the aid. You will need to try it in a variety of situations to see whether it is helpful enough. The cost of a hearing aid is going to run into hundreds of pounds, so you need to be sure that what you are buying will help you.

Read any document you are asked to sign carefully. Remember that by signing an agreement to buy an aid, you are entering into a legal contract. So if you are unhappy or unsure about anything in the contract, don't sign!

CHOOSING A HEARING AID

Most people need some guidance about getting a hearing aid. The Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) publishes a booklet, 'Hearing Aids - Questions and Answers', which answers some of the most common queries and is available free of charge.

Here are a few points that you may find helpful.

- You may wonder whether to buy an aid or obtain 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, there may be several months' wait for your first ENT appointment for an NHS aid, and you may prefer 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 often easy to insert in your ear.
 - Be aware that some 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 unresolved problem.
 - If you decide to buy an aid, you should find that it will last you quite a long time, around 5-7 years. But, of course, if your hearing deteriorated significantly, you would need to replace the aid with a more powerful model.
 - Some people may use two aids, rather than just one. A second aid is usually also available through the NHS if required.
 - Owning a commercial aid does not affect your rights to an NHS aid.
-

OTHER HELP WITH HEARING

Hearing aids are very helpful to most people with a hearing loss. But many hearing aid users also use 'environmental aids' - special equipment to help them hear some of the sounds around the home that give extra problems, such as the TV, radio, telephone and doorbell.

TV and radio

Specially designed devices are available for amplifying the sound from your TV and radio, or you could use a home loop system in conjunction with your hearing aid.

Telephones

Some telephones have an amplified handset, enabling you to turn up the volume to hear the other person better. In addition, some phones are fitted with a small loop known as an 'inductive coupler'.

Doorbells

If you have difficulty hearing your doorbell, a louder doorbell or extension bell may be all you need. But if these are not sufficiently helpful, there are a number of other devices which can alert you to your doorbell.

Where to obtain environmental aids

Environmental aids are usually available free of charge through your local social services department. Ask to speak to the social worker with deaf people. If you prefer to buy the equipment yourself, the RNID is able to give advice and information on suppliers and prices.

Lip-reading

Lip-reading is a skill which most people use unconsciously to some degree. We usually concentrate our attention on another person's face and lips if we are having difficulty hearing what they are saying (often because of intrusive background noise). We do this in an attempt to search for any visual clues to help us decipher what the speaker is saying.

If you have a hearing loss, then lip-reading can become a very useful aid to hearing. Of course, everyone's skills are different, but going to a local lip-reading class may well bring out your own potential. It can be quite a social weekly event! Most local adult education authorities run lip-reading classes. Find out about yours through your local library, or the British Association of the Hard of Hearing.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Research into Hearing Loss and Hearing Aids

Because damage to the inner ear reduces our ability to discriminate between different sounds, even when they are loud enough to be heard, a hearing aid which amplifies all sound indiscriminately may help us to hear but not to understand.

The problem of distinguishing between wanted and unwanted sound, particularly in noisy surroundings, is probably the one that bothers hearing aid users more than any other. Many aids are now said to block out unwanted noise, but, while there have been improvements, no aid yet overcomes the problem satisfactorily.

The Hearing Research Trust, along with the RNID and the Medical Research Council, is supporting the development of new sound-processing systems. But there is still some way to go before the laboratory systems can be miniaturised and used in wearable hearing aids.

More fundamental research on how the inner ear works and how it is damaged by old age, by some prescribed medicines and by other factors such as noise, is also essential if hearing loss is to be prevented and treated successfully.

This section was written in association with:



HEARING
RESEARCH
TRUST

HEARING RESEARCH TRUST

330-332 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8EE

Tel: 071-833 1733

The Hearing Research Trust is a national charity devoted solely to encouraging and supporting medical research that helps people with a hearing impairment and aims to prevent others suffering in the future.

USEFUL ADDRESSES

ROYAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR DEAF PEOPLE (RNID)

105 Gower Street
London WC1E 6AH

Tel: 071-387 8033
Fax: 071-388 2346

Text: 071-388 6038 (Qwerty 300 Baud)
071-383 3154 (Minicom)

The RNID has six other offices; in the Midlands, the South-East, the South-West, the North, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

The RNID is a national charity representing the interests of both deaf and hard of hearing people. It campaigns for improvements in facilities and services, and for more awareness of deafness by both government and the general public. It also has a tradition of research in science and technology applied to deafness.

In addition, the RNID provides direct services to deaf and hard of hearing people and to professionals working in the field of deafness. These services include:

- **a hearing advisory service** (London and Glasgow only), which gives independent and individual advice on deafness, hearing aids and environmental aids. A wide range of leaflets is also available.
- **an information service.**

BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF THE HARD OF HEARING (BAHOH)

7-11 Armstrong Road
London W3 7JL

Tel: 081-743 1110

BAHOH is a national voluntary organisation which provides information on lip-reading classes, local hard of hearing groups, hearing loss and equipment. It also runs a counselling service, and administers the Sympathetic Hearing Scheme, a national project promoting awareness of the communication needs of hard of hearing people.



In the community

This leaflet has been sponsored by BT through its Community Programme to give older people guidance about hearing in later life.

Each year, BT devotes a set amount of pre-tax profit to community causes as part of its concern for the wider health and well-being of the communities in which it does its business.

BT has a special unit, Action for Disabled Customers, to help customers with disabilities, including those who have hearing problems.

Each year, the unit publishes a guide for people who are disabled or elderly, which lists equipment and services to help overcome hearing impairment. Copies can be obtained by ringing 150.

If you would like further details about BT's Community Programme, contact:

Community Affairs Division
Floor B3
BT Centre
81 Newgate Street
London EC1A 7AJ

Telephone 071-356 6678

This leaflet was written in association with The Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) and is sponsored by BT.

Help the Aged

St James's Walk
London EC1R 0BE
Telephone 071-253 0253



Help the Aged

SeniorLine is Help the Aged's free national information service for senior citizens, their relatives, carers and friends.

Tel: 0800 289 404, 10.00 a.m. - 4.00 p.m. Monday to Friday.
Your call will be free of charge. Minicom - 0800 269 626