

Getting hearing aids

 **ACTION ON
HEARING
LOSS**

A national charity since 1911



Formerly
RNID •)))



“I remember vividly the day I had my hearing aids fitted. As I walked home, I heard birds singing – it made me cry! I was amazed to hear all the sounds I’d long forgotten about.

Now I get to enjoy all the things I’d been missing – catching up with friends, going to the theatre, having my say in work meetings, and being able to have a conversation with my hubby without him speaking directly into my ear!

Without my hearing aids, I know I’d be extremely depressed, withdrawn and totally isolated at work and at home. They are the first thing I reach for in the morning and they’ve certainly changed my life, very much for the better.”

Wendy, Staffordshire

You'll find this leaflet useful if you have hearing loss and are considering getting hearing aids for the first time. We explain how you can get hearing aids, the benefits of using them and what your options are.

If you already have hearing aids, our leaflet *Adjusting to your hearing aids* will help you get the most out of them.

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Please let our Information Line know if you'd like this leaflet in large print, braille or audio (see back page for contact details).

How could hearing aids help me?

Many people with hearing loss tell us that getting hearing aids for the first time is completely life-changing.

The difference hearing aids can make to your hearing will depend on your particular hearing loss – your audiologist (hearing specialist) will advise you on how they can help you. While they won't give you perfect hearing, they should make the sounds you find difficult to hear louder. They should help you to hear speech more clearly, making communication easier, and help you to hear everyday sounds such as the doorbell and telephone ringing.

Most hearing aids are also designed to reduce certain kinds of background noise, such as the rumble of traffic. This makes listening more comfortable, but you might still struggle to pick out one voice from general chatter – for example, when you're having a conversation in a noisy restaurant – as hearing aids can't cut out background noise completely.

There's a range of accessories that you can use with your hearing aids to make listening easier in 'challenging' environments. These are called assistive listening devices and there are different types for different situations – for example, when dealing with background noise, taking part in a group conversation, watching the TV or using the phone. These devices can help you to focus on the sound you want to hear and improve the quality of the sound you hear through your hearing aids.

Your hearing aids should never make sounds uncomfortably loud or make your hearing worse. You may find that your natural hearing seems dull when you take out your hearing aids, but that's just because you've become used to hearing better while using them.

How hearing aids can improve quality of life

As well as helping you to hear everyday sounds better, there are other benefits of using hearing aids:

- you won't have to concentrate as much and strain to hear, so you'll feel less tired
- they'll help you to communicate with others in social situations, at work and at home, so can help to reduce feelings of isolation or loneliness
- it's suggested that hearing aids help to boost your memory and thinking abilities, as your brain is being stimulated
- some experts also say that getting hearing aids may even reduce the risks of developing dementia.

Research shows that the sooner you get hearing aids after noticing your hearing loss, the more you'll get out of them – so don't delay!



To find out more about assistive listening devices, see our **Products and technology** range of factsheets.

How can I get hearing aids?

You can get hearing aids free from the NHS or buy them from a private audiology service. You'll first need to have your hearing tested, so the audiologist can find out more about the hearing difficulties you are having and check that hearing aids can help.

To have an NHS hearing test, you usually need a referral from your GP. In some areas, you can book an appointment with an NHS audiology service yourself, without a referral, but this option isn't widely available (you can check with your GP).

If you want to get your hearing tested privately, you don't need a referral from a GP. Many private audiology services offer free hearing tests, but remember that if you want to get your hearing aids from a private service, you'll need to pay for them, whereas they are free from the NHS.

Even if you don't need a referral from a GP to have your hearing tested, you may still wish to see your GP first anyway, so they can check there isn't an obvious cause of your hearing loss that can be easily treated – such as an infection or a build-up of ear wax. Your GP may also be able to identify whether you need additional support from another specialist, such as an ear, nose and throat (ENT) doctor.



To find out more about the hearing tests you'll have, see our leaflet *How's your hearing?*

Your choice of hearing care provider

Under a scheme called Any Qualified Provider (AQP), some private audiology services also deliver NHS adult audiology services. This means that if the scheme is available in your area, and you meet the criteria, you'll have more choice about which NHS audiology service you are referred to.

What's the difference between NHS and private hearing aids?

You can get modern, good quality digital hearing aids from both NHS and private audiology services.

The main difference is that you can't always choose the type of hearing aid you get free from the NHS, whereas you have more choice if you go private and buy hearing aids.

Most often, the NHS provides modern behind-the-ear (BTE) hearing aids ([see page 10](#)). You may be able to choose the type of ear fitting and the colour of your hearing aids, and the audiologist will fine-tune them to suit your needs.

If you go private, as well as being able to choose from BTE hearing aids, you may have the option of hearing aids that fit inside your ear canal, if they're suitable ([see pages 11-12](#)). You'll also be able to choose between basic, mid-range and high-end hearing aids, depending on your needs and how much you want to spend. However, some private audiology services only sell certain brands of hearing aid, or just their own.

If you're thinking of buying hearing aids, make sure you don't spend your money on a model that you can get free from the NHS or has advanced features that you don't need. It's a good idea to shop around before buying (see box below).

How much are private hearing aids?

Research carried out by Which? shows you can pay anything from around £500 to £3,500 and above for a single hearing aid – the more you spend, the more advanced the features will be. The average cost of a pair of hearing aids is about £3,000.

Remember, you'll have to pay again when your hearing aids need replacing. You'll also need to pay for any new earmoulds, tubing and batteries, and any repairs after the warranty expires. Ask your audiologist to explain what you'll need and to give you an idea of the ongoing costs.

Shop around before you buy hearing aids

It's always a good idea to shop around to compare types of hearing aid, prices, trial periods, warranty periods and after-sales care (follow-up appointments). Read the terms and conditions of the contract before you sign it, and check there is a money-back guarantee, in case you're not satisfied with your new hearing aids.

How do hearing aids work?

Digital hearing aids use advanced technology to process sound. There are different shapes, sizes and types of digital hearing aid, but they all work in a similar way to make sounds louder and clearer:

1. A built-in microphone picks up sound and turns it into an electrical signal.
2. Digital technology in the hearing aid amplifies the electrical signal (makes it bigger).
3. The amplified signal is then converted back into sound for you to hear.

The digital technology used to process sound means that an audiologist can adjust your hearing aids to suit your particular hearing loss.

Many digital hearing aids also have different settings for different listening environments – some even adjust automatically. For example, most hearing aids have a directional microphone, which helps you pick up sounds in front of you, rather than at the side or behind. This can help you focus on what you want to listen to in noisy places.

Should I have one hearing aid or two?

If you have hearing loss in both ears, you should get a hearing aid for each ear. Studies have shown that using two hearing aids is likely to help much more than using just one: you should find it easier to follow conversations over background noise, tell which direction a sound is coming from and enjoy better sound quality. However, in some cases, you may only need one hearing aid – for example, if you have hearing loss in one ear.

What are the different types of hearing aid?

If you need hearing aids, your audiologist will advise on which type of hearing aid can help you to manage your hearing loss effectively.

Behind-the-ear hearing aids

The NHS most commonly fits **behind-the-ear (BTE)** hearing aids, but other types are available from the NHS too. BTE hearing aids rest behind your ear and send sound into your ear in one of three different ways:

1. Through a piece of clear, flexible tubing connected to an **earmould** that fits inside your ear (see picture 1). Many people who get NHS hearing aids have this type.
2. Through very thin, clear tubing connected to a small, **soft tip** (dome) that sits inside your ear canal (see picture 2). This type of earpiece is known as an **open ear fitting** and can be less noticeable than an earmould. Because it blocks the ear less, it may give you a more natural sound, but it's only suitable if your hearing loss is mild or moderate. It's unlikely to be suitable if you have frequent ear infections or if you find fiddly tasks awkward.

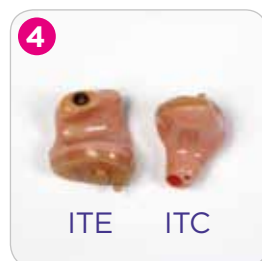


3. Through a wire, which runs from the hearing aid to a tiny loudspeaker held in the ear by a soft tip (see picture 3). There are many different names for this type of aid – such as **receiver in the ear**, **receiver in the canal** and **loudspeaker in the ear** – but they are all essentially the same thing and are now available from some NHS services. Like open ear fittings, they are not suitable for all levels of hearing loss. They are also likely to be unsuitable if you have sight loss or find fiddly tasks awkward, or if you have frequent ear infections.



In-the-ear and in-the-canal hearing aids

In-the-ear (ITE) hearing aids and **in-the-canal (ITC)** hearing aids (see picture 4) have their working parts in the earmould, so the whole aid fits into your ear. ITE aids come in different sizes – what's suitable for you will depend on the severity of your hearing loss and the size of your ear. All ITE aids can be seen in the ear (from the side). ITC aids are smaller and less visible – they fit right inside your ear canal.



If you have severe hearing loss, very small ear canals or frequent infections, ITC hearing aids probably won't be suitable for you. If you have trouble using small controls, these aids may not suit you unless they come with a remote control.

Completely-in-the-canal hearing aids

Completely-in-the-canal (CIC) hearing aids fit further into your ear canal than ITC aids. They are less visible and, in some cases, are hidden from view unless someone looks closely at your ear. As these hearing aids are very small, it's unlikely that they'll have features like a hearing loop setting ([see page 14](#)), because they are too small to carry the technology. This type of hearing aid isn't usually available from the NHS.

Invisible-in-the-canal hearing aids

Invisible-in-the-canal (IIC) hearing aids, which have been around for a few years, are available to buy privately. They are fitted very deeply in the ear canal. Some IIC models stay in your ear for a few months at a time and can only be removed by your audiologist, who will maintain and clean the aid for you. You can take other models out of your ear by yourself.

IIC aids are only suitable if you have a mild to moderate hearing loss and, like CIC aids, they may have limited features because of their size.

If you are interested in hearing aids that fit inside your ear, an audiologist will help you to decide which type is best for you – it will depend on your hearing loss, the size of your ear canal, your lifestyle and how much money you wish to spend.

Other types of hearing aid

Body-worn hearing aids (see picture 5) have a small box that you can clip to your clothes or put in your pocket. This is connected by a lead to an earmould or a soft tip. This type of hearing aid may suit you if you have sight problems or have difficulty using very small buttons. Some models are very powerful and are suitable for people with severe hearing loss. Your audiology service may not routinely stock body-worn hearing aids as they aren't often used - they may need to order them for you.



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 into the hearing ear. BiCROS aids amplify sound from both sides and feed it into the ear with better hearing. There are now wireless versions available from the NHS.

Bone-conduction hearing aids are for people who can't wear conventional hearing aids or for those with a conductive hearing loss, which is usually the result of sound waves not being able to pass freely to the cochlea (the hearing organ) in the inner ear. This type of hearing aid delivers sound directly to the cochlea, through the skull, using vibrations. One kind involves wearing a headband or glasses that have a bone conductor attached; the other involves having an operation behind the ear to implant a permanent fixture in the bone, which removes the need to wear a headband. A small sound processor, called a bone-anchored hearing aid (BAHA), clips on to this fixture.



Find out more in our factsheet [Bone-conduction hearing aids](#).

What is the hearing loop setting?

Most hearing aids have a hearing loop setting (formerly called the 'T' setting), which lets you connect your hearing aids to listening equipment such as a hearing loop. This can help you to hear sound more clearly over background noise.

You can find hearing loops in public places such as theatres and cinemas. Banks and post offices often have loops at the counters. You can also get loops for use at home.

What is Bluetooth technology?

Bluetooth technology connects Bluetooth-compatible electronic devices, wirelessly, when they are within 20m of each other.

If you get hearing aids that are Bluetooth-compatible, you can use a Bluetooth 'streaming device', neckloop or ear hooks to link them with Bluetooth-compatible smartphones, MP3 players, computers, tablets, TVs and other devices. This means you can turn your hearing aids into wireless 'headsets' and listen hands-free through both hearing aids at the same time.

Some newer hearing aids can now also connect directly, via Bluetooth, to smartphones and tablets through technology known as Made for iPhone (MFi). Ask your audiologist about your options.

How long will I have to wait for my hearing aids?

If you're getting NHS hearing aids, once you've been seen by an NHS audiologist, you should expect to have your hearing aids fitted around 20 working days after the assessment. The time you have to wait may depend on the type of hearing aid you need. But it also depends on whether you live in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, as each country has different targets for treatment times – check with your audiologist.

If you buy hearing aids, the waiting time is usually no longer than two weeks, but check with your audiologist.

How are hearing aids fitted?

If you need earmoulds for your hearing aids, the audiologist will take impressions of your ears so that the moulds can be made to fit your ears snugly. They'll ask you to come back to get your new hearing aids when the earmoulds are ready.

At your fitting appointment, the audiologist will ask you questions about your lifestyle and adjust your hearing aids to suit your hearing loss and everyday needs by programming them with a computer. Beforehand, think about the sounds you listen to most often, and in which situations you struggle to hear.

The audiologist will make sure your hearing aids sit comfortably in your ears and show you how to use and look after them. This will include how to put your hearing aids in and remove them easily. Don't be afraid to ask plenty of questions if you're unsure of anything.

How long will it take me to adjust to my hearing aids?

When you first get hearing aids, you may find that everything sounds louder than you expect and your own voice may sound strange – this is fairly normal. Research findings vary, but one study shows that, on average, it takes around a month to adjust to hearing aids and get the most out of them, when wearing them regularly in various situations. But for some people it can take longer. The important thing is not to give up – if you have any difficulties, tell your audiologist so they can help.

Your audiology service should offer you a follow-up appointment, or telephone review, to see how you're getting on with your hearing aids. This should be within 12 weeks of having your hearing aids fitted if you go through the NHS, or a week or two after your fitting if you go private. If you find that the sounds you hear, or the hearing aids, are still uncomfortable, your audiologist can make some adjustments.

If you have any problems with your hearing aids in between appointments, contact your audiology service for support.



Find out more about fitting, using and looking after your hearing aids in our leaflet *Adjusting to your hearing aids*.

Help with your hearing aids

If you get NHS hearing aids, you may be able to benefit from the Action on Hearing Loss hearing aid support service. Our community officers and volunteers help people to manage and maintain their NHS hearing aids through home visits and drop-in services across the UK.

Visit actiononhearingloss.org.uk/heartohelp or contact our Information Line (**see back page**) to find out more.

What else can help me manage my hearing loss?

There are many things that can help you to manage hearing loss alongside hearing aids. Visit actiononhearingloss.org.uk/livingwithhearingloss or contact our Information Line ([see back page](#)) to find out about:

- learning to lipread at a local class
- communication tips
- communication support
- assistive technology and products to help you hear more clearly over background noise or alert you to sounds at home
- financial benefits and other practical support.

Many people find sharing experiences and information with others in similar situations helpful. Our 'Deafness and Hearing Loss' online forum is a lively and supportive space for people who are connected by hearing loss. Visit community.actiononhearingloss.org.uk

You could also see if there's a hearing loss support group near you – contact our Information Line or visit actiononhearingloss.org.uk/in-your-area to find out.

Where can I get more information?

Action on Hearing Loss has a wide range of information on all aspects of deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss. We have the latest information on adjusting to your hearing aids, assistive technology and products, communication support, rights and benefits.

You can also find out about services in your area, becoming a member and receiving our magazine, the latest research developments, and getting involved as a volunteer or supporter.

Visit our website – actiononhearingloss.org.uk – or contact our free, confidential Information Line ([see back page](#) for contact details).

To see our full range of leaflets and factsheets, visit actiononhearingloss.org.uk/publications

Information you can trust

The Information Standard certifies us as producers of high-quality, evidence-based information. For a list of references for this leaflet, please email references@hearingloss.org.uk

Thank you to **Yashmita Dajee**, Clinical Scientist (Audiology) at Hearing and Balance Services, King Edward VII Hospital, Windsor, for reviewing this leaflet and ensuring that it is based on reliable, up-to-date research and evidence.

Did you find this information helpful?

Please share your feedback by emailing us at reviewpanel@hearingloss.org.uk. And if you'd like to join our Readers' Panel, to help us create and review information for our website and publications, please let us know.

Products to help with hearing loss and tinnitus

We specialise in equipment to make your life easier, safer and more enjoyable. Call us or go online to find out about our wide range of products that will support you with every situation: at home, at work and on the move.

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Action on Hearing Loss (formerly RNID) is the largest UK charity helping people who are confronting deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss.

We give support and care, develop technology and treatments, and campaign for equality. We rely on donations to continue our vital work.

To find out more, visit actiononhearingloss.org.uk

Questions about deafness, tinnitus or hearing loss?

Contact our free, confidential Information Line:

Telephone 0808 808 0123

Textphone 0808 808 9000

SMS 0780 000 0360
(standard text message rates apply)

Email information@hearingloss.org.uk

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