

deafness research uk



Helping you to hear better

Hearing loss and hearing aids



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How this leaflet can help

This leaflet has been produced for people who are having difficulties with their hearing and offers suggestions for treatment. It could also be useful to those who have a friend or relative whom they feel might need some encouragement or support in getting help.

If you require additional information on hearing loss, hearing aids or communication tactics, contact the Deafness Research UK Advisory Service on 0808 808 2222 or email info@deafnessresearch.org.uk

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You're not alone

Hearing loss is a more common problem than you might think. It affects around nine million people in the UK (or one in seven). Half of people aged over 60 are affected but hearing loss is not just confined to older age groups, you can develop a hearing problem at any age.

People often find the idea of losing their hearing worrying. Our research shows that many people are reluctant to seek help, tending to wait between 10-15 years before seeing a doctor. However, there are good reasons to take action early.

An untreated hearing loss can affect your quality of life, creating communication problems and affecting relationships, especially with partners but also with other family members, friends and colleagues. Your family and friends may have difficulty in discussing things with you or they may not include you in conversations because they feel communication is difficult. It may also leave you feeling tired which may cause problems at work and if you feel embarrassed that you cannot hear properly, you may be at risk of becoming withdrawn and depressed.

It doesn't have to be like this however, as research shows that getting help, typically with a hearing aid, can result in significant improvements in quality of life, greatly improving your ability to communicate with colleagues, family and friends, including any much-loved grandchildren. People often tell us that their hearing aid has made things easier at work or completely transformed their social life.

In many cases, the new digital hearing aids available both on the NHS and privately can improve your hearing significantly. Deafness Research UK has been at the forefront of developing new hearing aid technology and is supporting research that will help improve it still further.

What causes hearing loss?

Ageing is the most common reason for permanent hearing loss in adults. But other causes include genetics, prolonged exposure to loud noise, disease and certain medications.

Hearing loss caused by noise exposure can result from working in a noisy environment, military service or regularly listening to loud music. Generally this type of hearing loss occurs gradually due to exposure over a number of years, but sometimes a noise is so loud it can cause an immediate loss of hearing. Because of increasing noise exposure many people are experiencing hearing loss in their 40s and 50s whereas previously, such problems usually became noticeable from the age of 60 onwards.

Temporary hearing loss can be caused by a build up of earwax, infections, including middle ear infections, or obstruction by a foreign body in the ear.

Do I need a hearing aid?

Most hearing loss occurs very gradually and you may not be aware that your hearing is deteriorating. If you think you might need hearing aids, the first thing to do is visit your family doctor (GP) and they will check your hearing and refer you to a specialist if needed.



If you answer yes to any of the following questions, you might benefit from having your hearing tested and being fitted with a hearing aid:

- Do you find people talk less clearly?
- Do you find that people drop the ends off their words?
- Are some voices harder to hear than others?
- Do people have to repeat what they are saying, talk louder or shout at you?
- Do you need to have the volume on the television or radio louder than other people?
- Do you have trouble hearing people in noisy environments?
- If your hearing is noticeably worse in one ear and/or you have strange noises or ringing (tinnitus) in one ear, you should mention this to your GP.

Whether you choose to obtain hearing aids free of charge on the NHS or buy them privately, digital aids can be matched closely to your particular hearing loss, and amplify the sounds you have most difficulty hearing. They include features to help you hear better in noise, including directional microphones to help pick out voices.

Modern hearing aids are also smaller and more discreet. They use thinner tubing and newer styles do not require an earmould. This offers further advantages such as greater comfort and experience of a more natural sound, as well as avoiding problems such as wax build-up or ear infections caused by unhygienic moulds.

If you are one of the many people in the UK who also experiences ringing or other sound in your ears or head – the often distressing condition known as tinnitus – then research shows that hearing aids can be helpful in helping you cope with this as well.

How could a hearing aid help?

Most sounds such as speech are made up of a range of different frequencies from low to high.

If you have a hearing loss, your ability to hear different frequencies will be affected; what voices sound like will depend on the pattern and degree of your hearing loss. It is more common for a hearing loss to affect the higher frequencies, especially as we get older. This makes it more difficult to hear the consonant sounds in speech and often leads to situations where you can hear part of what is being said, but may miss whole words and not fully grasp a sentence. This is a particular problem if there is background noise.

A hearing aid amplifies the frequencies you have difficulty hearing. It can be selected and programmed to provide the right amount of amplification at the required frequencies for you.

There are several different types of hearing aid available: behind the ear (BTE); receiver in the canal (RIC); full shell or 'concha'; half shell or half concha; canal or mini-canal; completely in the canal (CIC) and in the ear (ITE). For more information, read our hearing aids factsheets (see page 09 for more details).

Which type you choose will depend on your particular type of hearing loss and your audiologist or specialist will be able to help you choose the best fit for you. Behind the ear is suitable for significant loss, whilst the others can be used for mild to moderate loss.

Whatever type you choose, the hearing aid will be tuned to match your particular hearing loss. It will increase the frequencies you have trouble hearing so that you can hear a wide range of sounds but without any of them being uncomfortably loud. It can suppress some annoying types of background noise and avoid feedback – the high-pitched whistle common in older hearing aids. You will be able to switch to different settings for different listening conditions. Most aids have a facility for use with telephones called a 'telecoil' or 't-switch'. This allows only the sound from the phone to be heard and reduces background noise.

What's the difference between NHS and private aids?

There are two choices when it comes to getting a hearing aid: the NHS or private. There are advantages and disadvantages to both and it is a case of weighing these up before making your decision. Whichever route you choose your first step should be to see your GP.

NHS hearing aids

Digital hearing aids available through the NHS use the same technology as hearing aids available privately. They can be just as effective at meeting your hearing needs.

In order to have your hearing tested you should first visit your GP who will check your ears for any relevant ear problems such as an infection or a build-up of earwax. Your GP will then refer you to a hospital where your hearing will be assessed.

The NHS most commonly provide a behind the ear style hearing aid. This can also be open fitting if an earmould is not required and can usually be fitted in one appointment. If a wax impression of your ear has to be taken, then you will need to return for a second appointment. You will then be shown how to insert your aid and be given advice on how to gain the maximum benefit from it. A follow-up appointment will be arranged for you, around four to six weeks afterwards. The NHS has also introduced Hearing Direct, a telephone follow-up service and patient helpline, if you need advice or support. Batteries for NHS hearing aids are provided free of charge.

You can obtain more detailed information about getting an NHS hearing aid from Deafness Research UK.



Private hearing aids

There are various reasons why some people prefer to get a hearing aid privately. Although NHS waiting times are now a lot shorter, a private hearing test and hearing aid may be obtained more quickly. Having a private aid does not affect your right to get a free-of-charge NHS aid at a later date.

Smaller hearing aids are more readily available privately and the choice will be wider, particularly the in-the-ear and in-the-canal models. The more expensive aids can offer additional features tailored to your specific needs and come in a wide range of colours.

The price of hearing aids can range from £500 to more than £4,000 for a pair, which should also include after-care and follow-up appointments. You should also consider the future costs of repairing and replacing private hearing aids. As with any major purchase, we'd advise you to consider your options carefully and ensure that you don't feel pressured or rushed into making a decision too quickly. If you are not sure about your options, you could consider asking for advice from friends and/or family, as they may be able to help you choose the best hearing aid for you.

Batteries for private hearing aids are not usually included in the price of the aids and can cost around £4-6 for a pack of 6. These will last for about a month on average.

Checklist for getting a private aid:

- Visit your GP first so they can check all the possibilities relating to your hearing loss, including medical problems such as infections or build up of earwax
- Check that the hearing aid dispenser is registered with the Health Professions Council www.hpcheck.org or telephone 020 7582 0866
- Shop around and compare prices and services
- Consult with friends and/or family about your options – invite them along to help you make the right decision. This is an important purchase!
- Demand a minimum 28-day money back guarantee. Most retailers will offer 60 days. Don't forget to ask what the terms and conditions are.
- Most hearing aids take a while to get used to, so ask for a trial period before paying the full price up-front.

Getting the most out of your hearing aids

While a hearing aid can only work with your remaining hearing, it is important to remember that it will also take some time for the benefits of a hearing aid to be experienced. Your ears and brain have to adjust to hearing sounds that you may not have heard for a long time and, at first, they may not seem very natural.

Initially you may hear quiet background sounds, such as noise from electric fans, which may be annoying. Remember that your ability to hear soft sounds will help you to understand quiet speech and the more you wear your hearing aids, the more your brain will learn to focus on the sounds you do want to hear.

If your hearing aid feels uncomfortable at first, try slowly building up your use each day. We find that people say it takes up to six months to adjust fully. If you are still having trouble after your follow-up appointment with the NHS or private consultant, you should request another appointment. Hearing aids are sophisticated technology and it does take time to adjust the aid to best suit you. Don't give up and leave it sitting in a drawer.

Lipreading

The ability to lipread can also help in conjunction with using your hearing aids, helping you to communicate better and regain confidence. Attending lipreading classes can be a good way of getting used to your hearing aid in a supportive social environment, as well as learning useful communication tactics that can help you manage your hearing loss.

The Association of Teaching Lipreading to Adults (ATLA) has lists of classes taking place throughout the UK. Contact them c/o Hearing Concern LINK, 27-28 The Waterfront, Eastbourne, East Sussex, BN23 5UZ or visit their website www.lipreading.org.uk

About Deafness Research UK

Deafness Research UK is the country's leading medical research charity for people with hearing loss, tinnitus and other hearing problems. It was founded in 1985 because there was no other organisation in the UK specifically dedicated to meeting the medical and healthcare needs of deaf and hearing impaired people. The charity has played a key role in a number of major medical breakthroughs that have transformed life for millions of people and our work gives hope of better treatments and cures for the future.

Deafness Research UK Advisory Service

Freephone 0808 808 2222

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This leaflet has been produced by Deafness Research UK in consultation with a team of medical and scientific experts. Whilst all reasonable efforts are made to ensure that the information and advice given in this leaflet is taken from reputable sources and passed to the public in good faith, no responsibility can be taken on the part of the charity or its advisers for any error or omission. You should not act on advice without first referring to your family doctor or another medically trained professional.

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More information

We have a range of factsheets with further information on hearing loss, hearing aids, communications tactics and the latest hearing research.

Visit our website at www.deafnessresearch.org.uk

We can also send out hard copies, free of charge (up to 10 copies):

- Deafness in later life
- Ear infections
- Earwax
- Genetics and deafness
- Hearing aids: getting one on the NHS
- Hearing aids: your guide to buying them privately
- Hyperacusis
- Managing tinnitus: treating head noise
- Ménière's disease
- Noise in everyday life

Please fill out your contact details overleaf and return this form to:

Deafness Research UK
Freepost WC4938
London WC1X 8BR

- I would like to sign-up to the charity's bi-monthly email news update *Soundbite* (please ensure you include an email address above)
- I would like to receive the charity's regular printed newsletter.

