

# Buying hearing aids

We have lots of information on deafness, hearing loss and tinnitus.

Go to

[www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)

Contact our Information Line

Telephone 0808 808 0123

Textphone 0808 808 9000

Or write to us

[informationline@rnid.org.uk](mailto:informationline@rnid.org.uk)

19-23 Featherstone Street  
London EC1Y 8SL

Fax 020 7296 8199

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# Three facts

**RNID** • 

Changing the world for deaf and hard of hearing people

# Buying hearing aids

This factsheet is part of RNID's **hearing aids** range. It is written for adults who would like to understand more about buying hearing aids. We use the term 'deaf' to refer to people who are deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people throughout this factsheet.

## Read this factsheet to find out:

- What do I do if I think I have hearing loss?
- What should I consider if I'm thinking of going to a hearing aid dispenser?
- How do I choose a private hearing aid dispenser?
- How much will my hearing aids cost?
- How do I decide which hearing aids to buy?
- What features should I look out for in hearing aids?
- I have severe hearing loss. Will it be harder to find suitable hearing aids?
- What will happen when I go to a private dispenser?
- What happens next if I decide to buy hearing aids?
- Can I get my money back if I'm not happy?
- How long are my hearing aids guaranteed for?
- What should I check before signing the agreement to buy?
- What do I do if I have a problem with my hearing aids?
- Can I buy hearing aids abroad?
- Where can I get further information?

## What do I do if I think I have hearing loss?

If you have noticed that you are struggling to hear at times, a quick and easy way to check your hearing is with our telephone hearing check on 0845 600 5555. If the check indicates that you could have hearing loss, the next step is to contact your GP who will check your ears to see if you need further medical examination or treatment.

Usually, they will refer you to the audiology clinic or ear, nose and throat (ENT) department of your local hospital. Digital hearing aids are available free of charge through NHS audiology services. The NHS will usually give you high-quality, behind-the-ear (BTE), digital hearing aids fitted to suit your needs. But some people prefer to buy hearing aids from a private dispenser to have a choice of style of hearing aid, or extra features or to have a more convenient appointment.

## What should I consider if I'm thinking of going to a hearing aid dispenser?

- Try to make sure that you are in control of the decision to buy hearing aids. Be wary of newspaper advertisements that appear to be from an organisation that is campaigning or providing

information about hearing. These are often from companies who want to sell you hearing aids. Don't accept a home visit from a dispenser unless this is what you really want. It is usually better, if possible, to visit a fully equipped hearing aid shop or centre. This will help you feel more in control of the consultation and the room should have the correct sound proof conditions.

- Remember: hearing aids can't restore perfect hearing. They make sound louder so that you can hear it comfortably, but will not necessarily make everything completely clear. Hearing aids can make a huge difference in everyday life, but any hearing aid dispenser or company that promises to give you perfect hearing is giving you unrealistic expectations.
- By law, anyone offering to test your hearing and sell you hearing aids on the high street must be qualified or in supervised training and registered with the Health Professions Council (HPC), which regulates dispensers' training, skills and conduct, and investigates complaints. See page 8 for contact details. The HPC took over regulation of dispensers from the Hearing Aid Council on 1 April 2010.
- Qualified hearing aid dispensers have the letters 'RHAD' after their name. RHAD stands for 'Registered Hearing Aid Dispenser'. They may also use other letters after their name, such as MSHAA, FSHAA, or MRSH – these show their membership of professional organisations. But it is RHAD that shows they are qualified and registered to dispense hearing aids. If you can, before you go for your hearing test, try to compare what different dispensers will offer you and how much they will charge. You can find some helpful information from different companies on the internet. Be aware that some dispensers will only sell products from one or two hearing aid companies, while other dispensers will be able to offer a wider range of products. Don't be afraid to ask questions, and get all quotations in writing.

## How do I choose a private hearing aid dispenser?

- Contact RNID's Information Line (see front page). We can give you contact details of private hearing aid dispensers – but we cannot recommend one over another.
- You can check if a hearing aid dispenser is registered with the HPC by visiting [www.hpcheck.org](http://www.hpcheck.org) or calling 0845 300 4472. But the HPC can't recommend either individual dispensers or particular hearing aids.
- Your GP may be able to tell you about hearing aid dispensers in your area.
- If you know someone who has bought hearing aids privately, ask them if they would recommend their dispenser. But remember that their hearing loss is unlikely to be the same as yours, so their hearing aids may not necessarily be the right one for you.
- If you are thinking of buying from a dispenser who is visiting your area, check that you will be able to contact them easily in the future. You will need to be able to see them if you have a problem with your hearing aid and need to get it repaired or adjusted. If in doubt, contact the HPC and find out where the dispenser is based, or use a local dispenser instead.
- Find out the hours and days of each week when the dispenser will be available to help you. In some shops or centres the dispenser is there only at certain times.

- It may seem cheaper to buy your hearing aids abroad but it may be more expensive in the long run (see *Can I buy hearing aids from abroad* on page 7).

## How much will my hearing aids cost?

Private digital hearing aids can cost between £600 and £3,500 depending on their style and how sophisticated they are. Many companies charge extra for the more discreet in the ear (ITE), in-the-canal (ITC) and aids that fit completely in the ear canal. Hearing aids last five years or more, but you will have to pay again when they need replacing. Hearing aids that fit completely in the ear may not last as long. With behind-the-ear aids (BTE), you may also have to pay for new earmoulds from time to time.

Remember that you will also need to budget for a regular supply of batteries and any hearing aid repairs you need after the warranty expires. Batteries can cost between £25 and £40 a year for each hearing aid if you wear it all day. Repairs to the hearing aid can cost £100 or more each time.

## How do I decide which hearing aids to buy?

Hearing aids are available in a range of styles and with varying features. Not all hearing aids will suit your hearing loss. Also, hearing aids that work well for someone else may not necessarily be right for you. Very small hearing aids are usually only suitable for mild to moderate hearing losses. They may not be a good idea, if you find it hard to manage fiddly controls, unless you get a remote control.

The cheapest hearing aids are unlikely to perform well in difficult listening situations (where there's lots of background noise) unless you simply want one as a spare aid. However, that does not mean that you need all the advanced features that more expensive hearing aids may have.

## What features should I look out for in hearing aids?

- With more advanced digital aids, it is possible to tailor sound very precisely to suit your individual needs. The dispenser should be able to fine-tune your aids to give you the best result.
- Digital hearing aids divide the sound spectrum into a number of 'bands' or 'channels' and process each separately in order to increase clarity and comfort of sound. It is sometimes suggested that the more bands you have, the better your hearing experience will be. However, this really depends on your individual hearing loss and what situations you need to use the hearing aids in.
- Ask whether an open ear fitting might be suitable for you. This can give more natural sound quality if your hearing loss is not severe.
- Find out if you will be able to change the settings to suit different sound environments. Some hearing aids adapt to different environments automatically.
- Find out if the aids automatically control feedback to stop them from whistling.
- Outside, the noise made by the wind blowing across the microphone can sometimes be annoying. Ask whether the aids have a way of stopping this.

- Find out if the aids can reduce some kinds of background noise automatically, so that listening is more comfortable.
- Find out if they have directional microphones – this will make it easier for you to hear in noisy places.
- Find out how easy it is for you to switch the hearing aids on and off and use the controls. Make sure that you can feel them easily. You may find some models easier to use than others.
- Find out how well it works with your telephone.

Don't be pressured into buying expensive hearing aids unless you can try them first to make sure they are easy to use and that they really help you. Also, check that the dispenser offers a trial period in which you can get a refund if you're not happy with your hearing aids. See our leaflet **Getting hearing aids** and our factsheet **Digital hearing aids** for more information.

### **Hearing aids and loop systems**

Not all private hearing aids can be used with loop systems. If using a loop is important to you, make sure that you can use one with the model you are buying. A loop system helps deaf and hard of hearing people who use a hearing aid that has a 'T' setting to hear sounds more clearly by reducing or cutting out background noise. Infrared systems are an alternative to loop systems. To hear sound, you need to use an infrared receiver with a neckloop. See our factsheet **Induction loop and infrared systems – a guide for people who are deaf** for more information.

### **I have severe hearing loss. Will it be harder to find suitable hearing aids?**

No. There are models specially designed for people with severe and profound hearing loss. But you will be very reliant on the skill and experience of the dispenser in programming the aids to give you the best results.

### **What will happen when I go to a private dispenser?**

Whether you visit the dispenser or they visit you in your home, you may want to have someone with you for support and to make sure you don't feel pressured into buying hearing aids and you don't mishear something.

The hearing aid dispenser will ask you about your hearing and other related issues, look inside your ears and then test your hearing. Then, if the tests show that hearing aids are likely to help, the dispenser will discuss with you which type will suit you best. Ask if you can pay separately just for a hearing test if this is all you want at this stage.

The range of tests carried out can vary, but they must include an air conduction hearing test. In this test, you listen to tones (beeps) through headphones and tell the dispenser when you can hear them. If this test shows that you have some hearing problems, the dispenser will carry out a bone

conduction hearing test. In this test, you wear a special headband that conducts sound through the bones of your skull.

When the results are compared with what you heard through the headphones in the air conduction test, they show whether you have a problem with your eardrum or middle ear. You will be shown your results plotted as an audiogram. This is a graph that shows how well you hear low, middle and high-pitched tones.

## What happens next if I decide to buy hearing aids?

Once the dispenser has tested your hearing, they will discuss which kind of hearing aid will suit you. Most people will find a number of benefits from wearing two hearing aids such as:

- increased understanding in noisy situations
- knowing which direction a sound is coming from
- better hearing on both sides.

Also, ask the dispenser to give you information about all the different types of aid that might suit you, and their prices. Be wary if they don't give you any choices.

If you decide to buy hearing aids from the dispenser, they will usually then take an impression of your ear and send it to a laboratory for the earmould – or the casing, if it is a hearing aid that goes completely in the ear – to be made. This takes about a week. When this is ready, you will need to visit the dispenser again for them to fit and programme the hearing aids to suit your hearing loss and explain to you how to use it.

There are also some other, smaller types of earpiece, which can sometimes be used with BTE hearing aids instead of earmoulds. These look like a tiny soft plug round the tip of the tubing and are called 'open ear fittings'. They are less noticeable than hearing aids with earmoulds but are only suitable if your hearing loss is not severe. They can give you very natural sound because your ear is not 'blocked' by an earmould. With this kind of fitting, it is sometimes possible to have your hearing tested and get your hearing aids fitted all in one appointment. But if you feel exhausted from the test and explanations you may want to have the fitting on another occasion.

## Can I get my money back if I'm not happy?

Dispensers should give you at least a 28-day trial period with a money-back guarantee so that you can return the hearing aids if you aren't happy with them. If the dispenser isn't prepared to offer this or suggests a guarantee for repair only, instead of giving you the option of a refund, go somewhere else. You are unlikely to get a full refund because the price you pay usually includes the hearing tests and fitting. Some companies charge a 12.5% cancellation fee so check the small print and returns policy carefully before buying.

## How long are my hearing aids guaranteed for?

You will have to pay for repairs after the guarantee on the hearing aids runs out. The cost of these can mount up. Guarantee ('warranty') periods are often two years but can range between one and four years, so find out what the guarantee period is for the hearing aids you are being offered. You can usually insure your hearing aid against loss or damage through your household insurance, but it's a good idea to check this with your household insurance company first, before you buy the hearing aids.

## What should I check before signing the agreement to buy?

- Are you getting hearing aids you want at a price you can afford?
- What does the price include and what will you need to pay for in the future?
- Will you be able to contact and see the dispenser quickly if you have a problem with your aids?
- Before you sign anything, make sure you get everything in writing and that you understand all the terms of the agreement to buy your hearing aids.

## What do I do if I have a problem with my hearing aids?

Most people are happy with the hearing aids they buy and with the service they get from their private hearing aid dispenser, but some people run into difficulties because:

- the aids do not help them to hear as well or understand speech as clearly as they had hoped or were led to believe
- the dispenser pressurised them to buy hearing aids
- the hearing aids give repeated trouble – for example, they may whistle or be uncomfortable – and the dispenser cannot put this right.

If you have any problem at all with hearing aids you have bought, the first thing you should do is ask your dispenser for help and advice. Make a note of the problems you experience over a period of a few days so that you can explain what is wrong and help the dispenser to sort it out. It is very important that you are aware of the trial period and try and resolve any problems in this time so you can ask for a refund if you need to.

If you are still unhappy with your hearing aids, or feel the dispenser is not providing a good and professional service, contact the 'Fitness to practice' department at the HPC. See page 8 for contact details. Describe the problems you have had with the hearing aid dispenser, include copies of any correspondence or other documents connected with the sale and the contact details of the dispenser or company that sold you the hearing aids.

If the HPC decides a dispenser has broken any of its rules, it can caution or suspend them from the register. In extreme cases, a dispenser may be struck off the HPC's register and will be unable to continue to sell hearing aids. If you still aren't happy with the outcome, and feel the HPC has not

addressed your concerns, you could pursue a claim through the Small Claims Track. Your local citizen's advice bureau can advise you about this.

## Can I buy hearing aids abroad?

You may have read about cheaper hearing aids for sale abroad, particularly in Germany and Denmark. RNID can't recommend any particular hearing aid models, manufacturers or services. We would advise you to think carefully before buying hearing aids abroad.

The initial cost of buying hearing aids abroad may be lower than in the UK, but you may need to see the dispenser for adjustments – sometimes several times – which could be expensive and inconvenient. It is important to check before you buy what will happen if you need more help or if your hearing aids break down once you are back home. Hearing aid dispensers in the UK may offer to service your hearing aids but be aware some use this as an opportunity to pressure you into buying one of their hearing aids.

## Where can I get further information?

If you have any concerns about your hearing, you should always seek medical advice from your GP or audiologist.

### **Health Professions Council**

Park House, 184 Kennington Park Road, London, SE11 4BU

Telephone (8am to 6pm) 020 7582 0866 Fax 020 7820 9684

[www.hpc-uk.org](http://www.hpc-uk.org)

Visit [www.hpcheck.org](http://www.hpcheck.org) or phone 0845 3004 472 to find out if your hearing aid dispenser is registered.

#### **Fitness to practice department:**

Phone: 0800 328 4218 Fax: 020 7582 4874 [ftp@hpc-uk.org](mailto:ftp@hpc-uk.org)

### **Further information from RNID**

Our Information Line offers a wide range of information on many aspects of deafness and hearing loss. Contact us for further copies of this factsheet and our full range of information factsheets and leaflets. You can also contact us if you would like information in Braille, on audiotape or large print.

#### **RNID Information Line**

19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL

Telephone 0808 808 0123 Textphone 0808 808 9000 Fax 020 7296 8199

[informationline@rnid.org.uk](mailto:informationline@rnid.org.uk) [www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)

## **Buying equipment from RNID**

Visit [www.rnid.org.uk/shop](http://www.rnid.org.uk/shop) or contact the RNID Information Line for a copy of our *Solutions* catalogue, full of products for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

## **RNID Information, April 2010**