

# Getting hearing aids

How to use them  
and what to expect

**RNID** • )))

Changing the world for deaf  
and hard of hearing people

We're RNID, the charity  
working to create a world  
where deafness or hearing  
loss do not limit or determine  
opportunity, and where  
people value their hearing.

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

You should read this leaflet if your GP says you need further hearing tests. It will also help you if you think you may need hearing aids or have just got your first hearing aids.

You should read this leaflet if you want to know:

- what will happen at your hearing test
- what a hearing aid is and what it does
- how hearing aids work
- how to get hearing aids on the NHS or privately
- about different types of hearing aid
- how to use and look after your hearing aids
- what to do if your hearing aids aren't working properly.



## I have a hearing test – what will happen?

When you go to the hospital or clinic, you will be seen by an audiologist and sometimes by an ear, nose and throat (ENT) doctor. Before they test your hearing, you will be asked some questions about your hearing and they will look in your ears using an instrument called an otoscope.

The hearing tests – also called audiometry – last about 20 minutes. The audiologist will ask you to put on headphones and listen to sounds of differing frequencies (pitch) and levels of loudness. These are low, middle and high pitched musical notes. One ear is tested and then the other. You have to press a button each time you hear a sound. The audiologist will make them gradually quieter to find out the softest sounds you can hear. The results are drawn on a chart called an audiogram.



Then they may ask you to put on a headband with a vibrating pad. This pad transmits sound through the bones of your skull to the cochlea in your inner ear, on both sides of your head. Again you have to press a button each time you hear a sound. When the results are compared with the headphone test, it shows up any problems you might have with your eardrum or middle ear.

This helps to decide what can be done about your hearing loss.

At some point during the test, the audiologist might play a rushing noise into one ear to cover up the sounds on that side while your other ear is tested.

You may be given another test where you listen to sentences or words and repeat what you hear. This shows how well you are hearing the detailed pattern of sounds.

The audiologist will explain your test results and discuss whether hearing aids are likely to help you, or if you could have some other treatment. Occasionally, you will be offered further tests.

### What happens next?

If the audiologist says you need hearing aids, it's a good idea to try them. It takes time to get used to using them because you have to become familiar with the sounds you hear and with operating the controls, so the sooner you start the better. You can get free hearing aids on the NHS.

### What does a hearing aid do?

A hearing aid makes sounds louder and clearer so that you hear them comfortably. It is battery-operated and you put it in or behind your ear.

Hearing aids are available in different shapes, sizes and types. However, all hearing aids work in a similar way. The type of hearing aid you get will depend on your hearing loss and what you find comfortable. We tell you more about different types of hearing aid later.

## How does a hearing aid work?

Very simply, all hearing aids have a built-in microphone that picks up sound and converts it into an electrical signal. The signal is processed electronically and amplified. Most modern hearing aids do this using digital technology.

The resulting signals are then passed to a receiver, or earphone, in the hearing aid, where they are converted back into sounds for you to hear, made louder and tailored to suit your own hearing needs.

## Will hearing aids give me perfect hearing?

No they won't. But they should make sounds loud enough for you to hear them at a comfortable level. They should make conversation easier and may help you hear on the telephone, increasing your confidence when talking to other people. However, they won't necessarily make all sounds perfectly clear.

## I have tinnitus – could hearing aids help?

Yes. If you have tinnitus (hissing, buzzing or other noises in your ears or head), you may hear it less when you use a hearing aid.

To find out more about our range of free information on tinnitus, see the end of this leaflet.

## How quickly will I adjust to wearing hearing aids?

Adjustment can take time. After you first get hearing aids, you will need to gradually build up the amount of time you wear them so you can get used to the new sounds and the feeling of wearing them in your ears. Eventually, you should be able to wear them for most of the day comfortably. This may take up to three months, so you will need to be patient.

When you get your hearing aids, you should be given advice on how to get the best from them. You should also be shown how to use them and look after them. You can always ask for more help.

### Should I have one hearing aid or two?

If you have a hearing loss in both ears, wearing two hearing aids is likely to help much more than just wearing one. For example, you should find it easier to follow conversation in background noise and to tell which direction a sound is coming from. But if you only have a hearing loss in one ear, if one ear is much worse than the other, or if you have chronic infections in one ear, you may need only one hearing aid.

The audiologist should offer you a hearing aid for each ear if suitable. If you are offered two, it is a good idea to try them, as many people find two aids more helpful than one.



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

If you want hearing aids from the NHS, your first appointment to have your hearing tested should be within six weeks of your GP asking for this. But in some parts of the country at present the wait is longer. You may then have to wait up to three months before you have your hearing aids fitted.

For more information, read our factsheet [NHS Hearing Aid Service](#).

### Can I choose the sort of aid I want?

With the NHS, you cannot always choose the style of hearing aid you want. However, the NHS does have a range of hearing aids, and you should be able to get one that suits your particular hearing loss.



Some people prefer to buy hearing aids privately so that they can choose the style they want. Some types of hearing aid – such as aids that fit entirely in the ear – are not available on the NHS.

### How are hearing aids fitted?

The NHS generally fits behind-the-ear (BTE) hearing aids. These have an earmould connected to the main part of the hearing aid. There are also some other, smaller types of earpiece, which can be used instead of an earmould. We will explain this when we describe different types of hearing aid later.

If you need earmoulds, the audiologist will take impressions of your ears so that they can be made to fit your ears snugly. You will be asked to return to the hospital to get your new hearing aids a few weeks later when the earmoulds are ready.

At your fitting appointment, the audiologist will adjust your hearing aids to suit your hearing loss and everyday needs by programming them with a computer. They will make sure they sit comfortably in your ears and show you how to use and look after them. They will also make sure you can put the hearing aids in and remove them easily.

You should also be offered a follow-up interview to check that your hearing aids are helping you and you're not having any problems using them. This may be either in person or over the phone. Sometimes the hearing aids need fine-tuning to get the best result.

If you have problems with your hearing aids in between appointments, contact your audiology department.

## How long do hearing aids last?

Hearing aids last on average about five years. If you need more powerful hearing aids or new ones, you will not have to pay for them. NHS hearing aids are free. So are new earmoulds, tubing, batteries and, normally, repairs. However, if you lose or damage your hearing aids, you may be asked to pay something towards their repair or replacement.

## Can I buy my own hearing aids?

Yes. Ask your GP or a friend if they can recommend a private hearing aid dispenser. By law, all hearing aid dispensers must be qualified or in supervised training and registered with the Hearing Aid Council, which regulates dispensers' training and conduct, and handles complaints.

You can contact the Hearing Aid Council (Telephone **020 3102 4030** Fax **020 3102 4476** or visit [www.thehearingaidcouncil.org.uk](http://www.thehearingaidcouncil.org.uk)) to find out about dispensers in your area. For more information, read our factsheet **Buying hearing aids**.

In some ways, getting your hearing aids privately is similar to getting them from the NHS. You'll have your hearing tested and your hearing aid dispenser will show you how to use and look after your aids. But you also have to sign a contract agreeing to buy your hearing aids.

Make sure you read the terms and conditions of this contract and find out about any money-back guarantee before you sign anything. Ideally, you should get at least 28 days to try out the hearing aids and be able to return them during this time if you are not satisfied with them, and get a refund.

## How long will I have to wait if I buy privately?

Your hearing aid dispenser will probably see you within a week and you can get your hearing aids within about two weeks.

## How much do hearing aids cost?

To have them fitted privately, hearing aids cost between £300 and £3,000 each. However, this does not mean that getting two will cost between £600 and £6,000, since you should receive a discount when buying a pair. Medical insurance may cover part of the cost of hearing aids, but check with your insurer first. When the guarantee runs out, you will also have to pay for repairs and the costs of these can mount up. You will also have to buy your own batteries. Hearing aids last about five years on average so remember that you will have to pay for new ones in the future. You should also insure your hearing aids against loss, theft or damage if you buy them privately.

## What do 'analogue' and 'digital' mean?

Hearing aids are described as either analogue or digital, depending on the technology they use to process sound.

Digital hearing aids are the newest kind and are now available as standard on the NHS.

Digital hearing aids take the signal from their microphone and convert it into 'bits' of data – numbers that can be manipulated by a tiny computer in the hearing aid. This makes it possible for the hearing aid to process sounds in ways that are impossible with analogue aids.

It also means that the hearing aids can be finely adjusted to suit your individual needs. You may also be able to switch between different settings suitable for different listening conditions. Many digital aids even adjust themselves automatically to suit different sound environments.

Most digital hearing aids are also designed to whistle or squeak less than analogue aids. We talk about problems with hearing aids on pages 18-19.

## Can digital hearing aids help in noisy places?

One of the biggest problems for people with hearing aids is following what people are saying in noisy places. Many digital hearing aids are designed to reduce steady kinds of background noise such as the rumble of traffic or the whirr of a fan. This can make listening more comfortable, though it does not necessarily help you pick out one voice when many people are talking.

To help with this problem, many digital hearing aids use directional microphones to help you hear sounds best when they are directly in front of you so that you can focus on what you want to listen to.

## What are the different types of hearing aid?

The following types of aid are available as digital or analogue – except for body-worn aids and some types of bone conduction aid, which are analogue only. Your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser will advise you on the most suitable type for you.



**Behind-the-ear (BTE)** hearing aids usually have an earmould, which sits inside your ear. The hearing aid rests behind your ear and a plastic tube connects it to the earmould. They are the most common types of hearing aid and most people who get NHS hearing aids have one of these.

BTE hearing aids with 'open ear fitting' have a small, soft earpiece at the tip of the tubing instead of an earmould. This type of fitting can be less noticeable than an earmould but is only suitable if your hearing loss is mild or moderate. It can give you a very natural sound.



**Receiver-in-the-ear (RITE) or loudspeaker-in-the-ear BTEs** (not currently available on the NHS) have a clear tube with a wire inside, which runs from the BTE to a



loudspeaker held in the ear by a soft earpiece. These BTEs are often smaller because the receiver (a mechanical part of the hearing aid) sits inside the ear at the end of the wire. Therefore the hearing aid itself can be smaller. There are many different terms used to describe these – such as RIC, CRT, LITE – named by different manufacturers but they are all essentially the same thing. Like open ear BTEs, they can be easier to put in than an earmould if you find fiddly tasks awkward.

There are different RITE hearing aids for different levels of hearing loss. If your hearing loss is severe, you may need a type where the receiver sits in an earmould.



**In-the-ear (ITE)** and **in-the-canal (ITC)** aids have their working parts in the earmould so the whole aid fits into your ear. They tend to need repairing more often than BTE aids. Some ITE aids can be seen from the side.

The smallest in-the-canal aids fit right inside your ear canal, where they can hardly be seen at all. If you have severe hearing loss, very small ear canals or frequent infections, these aids will probably not be suitable for you. If you have trouble using small fiddly controls, these aids may not suit you unless they come with a remote control.



**Body-worn hearing aids** have a small box that you can clip to your clothes or put in your pocket. This is connected by a lead to an earphone and earmould. Body-worn hearing aids may be suitable if you have sight problems, or problems using very small switches or buttons. Some models are very powerful.



**Bone conduction hearing aids** are for people who cannot wear a conventional hearing aid or people with a 'conductive' hearing loss. They deliver sound through the skull by vibrations. One type involves an operation behind the ear and is called a bone anchored hearing aid (BAHA, not pictured).



**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 to the hearing ear. BiCROS aids amplify sound from both sides and feed it into the ear that has some hearing. There are now wireless versions available.

### How can I get the best from my hearing aids?

Once you get your hearing aids, it is important to practise using them and their various controls. This will help you get used to them and get the most from them. Make sure that the earmoulds fit snugly but comfortably.

It may take several months to get used to your aids. Start by wearing them once or twice a day for about an hour in quiet situations.

Listen to everyday noises – such as the kettle boiling or doors opening and shutting – to get used to how they sound. Then try conversations with one person, again in a quiet room. Make sure the other person sits facing the light so it's easier to lipread them.

Next, try conversations with two people or in small groups.

Don't expect to hear everything that is said, but try to follow the conversation. When you have practised using your hearing aids indoors, try using them outside. Be aware that some sounds can seem very loud at first, until you get used to them.

Finally, try using your hearing aids somewhere noisy such as a restaurant or pub. These are likely to be the most difficult situations. Your hearing aids may have a special setting that you can use for noisy places, so make sure you know how to do this.

You probably won't hear everything that people say to you, but with time this should get easier. People who wear their hearing aids all day, every day, do the best with them in the long run.

If you still can't get used to your hearing aids, talk to your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser. They will be happy to give you some tips on how to get the best out of your hearing aids.

### The 'T' setting

Most hearing aids either have a switch position marked 'T' or, if they are digital, a 'T' listening programme that you can switch to. On the 'T' setting, your hearing aids can pick up sound from listening equipment, such as a loop system (see [How else can I improve my hearing?](#) on page 20). This equipment transfers sound directly to your hearing aids, cutting out background noise. When you get your hearing aids, ask if they have a 'T' setting. If they are very small aids, there may be no room for one. This means that you won't be able to use listening equipment with them.



### Batteries

You need to change the batteries in your hearing aids regularly. If you have NHS hearing aids, you can get free batteries from any hospital audiology or ENT department that has a battery service. Sometimes you can get them from your local health centre. If you bought your hearing aids privately, you will need to buy batteries from a pharmacy or your hearing aid dispenser.

### What's the best way to look after my hearing aids?

When your hearing aids are fitted, you should be given written instructions about how to look after them. If you are not sure about any of the information, ask your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser for advice.

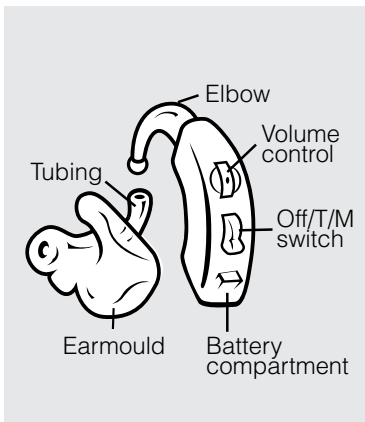
### Cleaning your BTE hearing aid

Clean the hearing aid by wiping it carefully with a soft, dry cloth or tissue. Take care not to get it wet.

## Cleaning your earmould

Earmoulds should be wiped clean every night with a soft, dry cloth or tissue. Don't use any chemicals as these can damage it. Use a pin or similar item to remove any wax or debris that has got into the channel that goes through the earmould.

About once a week, the earmould should be separated from the hearing aid and washed. However, you should check this with your audiologist first.



## Follow the instructions below for washing the earmould



Gently pull the soft tubing off the hooked part of the aid by holding onto the tubing with one hand and the hook of the aid with the other and tugging gently. Don't pull the tubing out of the earmould as you won't get it back in again.



Wash the earmould (with its tubing still in place) in warm, soapy water. Use a nailbrush to remove any wax. Rinse it well, blow down the tubing to get the water out and leave it to dry overnight. Then push the tubing back onto the hearing aid.



This picture (left) shows the earmould put back the wrong way round. Make sure the curve of the earmould goes the same way as the curve of your hearing aid (right).



An air-puffer is available to help dry the earmould and tubing after you have washed them.

The tubing will need changing every three to six months before it hardens or splits and causes problems. Your audiologist or dispenser can show you how to do this yourself or will replace it for you.

## How to look after ITE and ITC hearing aids

You mustn't wash these. Wipe them with a dry tissue and use a soft dry brush to remove wax from the opening. Don't poke anything into the opening as you may damage the earphone. These aids often come with instructions and cleaning tools to help you.

### Earmoulds

Ask your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser to make a new earmould if it wears out or becomes loose or uncomfortable. Occasionally some people are allergic to the earmould material and may need a special mould to be made from non-allergenic material.

## What if my hearing aids don't work properly?

If you are having problems with your hearing aids, your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser can help you. However, there are some common problems that you may be able to solve yourself.

If your hearing aids don't seem to be working:

- check that your hearing aids are switched on properly
- check that you haven't switched them to the 'T' setting by accident
- check the earmoulds are not blocked with wax
- check that the batteries are the right way round. If they are, try replacing them with new batteries
- if you have BTE hearing aids, take them out, pull the tubing off the elbows and blow down the tubing to remove any condensation that may have collected and could be blocking the sound. (If this continues to be a problem, ask if you can have special low-condensation tubing fitted.)
- check that the tubing is not squashed or split.

Buzzing noises may mean that you have switched your hearing aids to the 'T' setting by accident. However, if this is not the problem, buzzing generally means your hearing aids have developed a fault and need to be repaired.

Whistling or squeaking is caused by 'feedback', when sound amplified by your hearing aids is fed back into them. It may happen if:

- you have not put the earmoulds in properly – push them gently to check.
- you have excess wax in your ears – ask your GP to check your ears.
- the earmoulds do not fit your ears closely enough – you'll need to ask for new ones.
- the earmoulds, hooked 'elbows' or tubing in BTE aids become loose or they split. If this is the problem, you'll need to get help from your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser.



## How else can I improve my hearing?

You can get a range of equipment to help you hear conversation, your television or stereo. Some of it is specially designed to be used with hearing aids on their 'T' setting.



Loop and infrared systems are often fitted in places such as theatres, public halls, post offices and banks, so look out for this sign. You can also fit them at home.

Telephones described as 'hearing aid compatible' have a type of built-in loop. When you use this kind of telephone with your hearing aids on the 'T' setting, the sound you hear will be clearer and have less background noise.

You can also use conversation aids, radio microphone systems and listening equipment with your hearing aids by plugging in a neckloop or earloop, and switching your hearing aid to 'T'.

For more information read our leaflet **Products to make life easier**.

## Where can I get further information?

You might find some of our factsheets useful:

- **Digital hearing aids** (factsheet)
- **NHS hearing aids service** (factsheet)
- **Bone-conduction hearing aids** (factsheet)
- **Buying hearing aids?** (factsheet)
- **Cochlear implants** (leaflet)
- **Products to make life easier** (leaflet)

We also have a range of factsheets and leaflets about tinnitus.

## Want to know more?

Are you affected by hearing loss or tinnitus? Joining RNID is a great way to keep updated on developments, the new products that can help, details of accessible entertainment in your region, latest information and advice, and much more. You'll also be able to share your experiences of hearing loss with other members.

As a member we'll update you six times a year through our award-winning membership magazine, *One in Seven*.

If you're retired, membership costs just £15 a year.

### How to join

Complete the form on the reverse and send to our Freepost address.

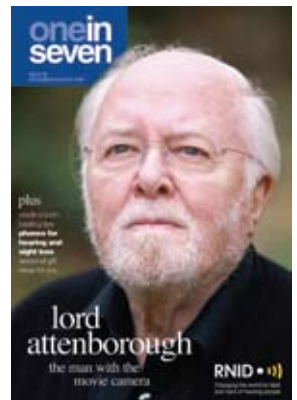
Alternatively:

- visit [www.rnid.org.uk/leafletjoin](http://www.rnid.org.uk/leafletjoin) or
- call **0845 634 0679** (tel/textphone) or
- email [membership@rnid.org.uk](mailto:membership@rnid.org.uk)

Contact us for more information:

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## Yes, I want to join RNID

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£22 standard rate

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In addition, I would like to make a donation of £ \_\_\_\_\_

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Please tick here if you **would like** to receive emails from us including your membership email every two months.

Occasionally, we may want to let you know about the work we are doing. If you would **prefer not** to be contacted in this way, please tick this box.

Occasionally, we will allow other organisations to contact you, but if you would **prefer not** to be contacted, please tick this box.



### Where can I get further information?

You might find some of our factsheets and other leaflets useful:

- Digital hearing aids (factsheet)
- NHS hearing aids service (factsheet)
- Bone-conduction hearing aids (factsheet)
- Buying hearing aids? (factsheet)
- Cochlear implants (leaflet)
- Products to make life easier (leaflet)

We also have a range of factsheets and leaflets about tinnitus.

**Please contact the Information Line (see back page) for more information and free copies of our leaflets and factsheets. And let us know if you would like any of them – or this leaflet – in Braille, large print or audio format.**

We're RNID, the charity  
working to create a world  
where deafness or hearing  
loss do not limit or determine  
opportunity, and where  
people value their hearing.

There are a number of ways  
to support us. To find out more:

Go to

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Contact our Information Line

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SMS\* 0780 0000 360

(\*costs vary depending on your network)

Or write to us

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

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