



# A guide to buying hearing aids

Hearing aids are provided free on the NHS to any UK citizen who has a hearing problem and could benefit from them. They are also available to buy from hundreds of hearing aid dispensers and a small number of NHS hospitals who offer a private dispensing service.

While NHS digital hearing aids are as effective as those available privately, you may decide to buy a hearing aid if you want a type of hearing aid not available on the NHS, or if you want a hearing aid with particular features. Although NHS waiting times are now acceptably short you may wish to obtain a private aid more quickly.

As buying a hearing aid is a complex procedure, Deafness Research UK has put together this factsheet to help you make a good choice.

## DO I NEED A HEARING AID?

Most hearing loss occurs very gradually so you may not be aware that your hearing is deteriorating but if you answer yes to any of the following you might benefit from having your hearing tested and being fitted with hearing aids:

- 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?

## WHAT DOES A HEARING AID DO?

Most sounds such as speech are made up of a range of different frequencies; for example, low frequency sounds such as vowels and high frequency consonant sounds.

If you have a hearing loss, your ability to hear different frequencies will be affected depending on the pattern and degree of your hearing loss. It is more common for a hearing loss to affect the higher frequencies initially, which generally happens as we get older. This makes the consonant sounds in speech more difficult to hear and

often leads to a situation where it is possible to hear that something is being said, but difficult to understand clearly what has been said. This is particularly true in background noise.

A hearing aid amplifies the sounds you have difficulty hearing. It can be selected and programmed to provide the required amount of amplification at the frequencies where it is needed most, in order to optimise speech understanding.

## **HOW DO I GO ABOUT BUYING A HEARING AID?**

Before you purchase a hearing aid, you will need to have your hearing tested. Although you can go to a hearing aid dispenser for this, it is sensible to first visit your GP as a dispenser is unlikely to be medically trained and would not be able to identify any associated medical problem.

If you do go to a hearing aid dispenser for a test and report certain symptoms or, if the dispenser is alerted to something, they must advise you to seek medical advice.

Your GP will examine your ears to check for a build up of wax or an ear infection and may also perform some simple hearing tests. If you report any symptoms such as noises in the ear, difficulties with balance, or you feel your hearing is noticeably worse in one ear, you may be referred to an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist.

## **HOW DO I FIND A HEARING AID DISPENSER?**

Dispensers can be located via the usual advertising media, the Internet and telephone directories, but standards and prices do vary so you need to choose with care. You may find it helpful to ask someone you know who has bought a hearing aid whether they would recommend their dispenser to you.

All hearing aid dispensers must be registered with the Health Professions Council (HPC) which exists to ensure hearing aids dispensers and a number of other health professionals meet suitable standards in their training, professional skills and behaviour. The HPC have taken over from the Hearing Aid Council (HAC) in this role since the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2010. You are advised to check a hearing aid dispenser is registered with the HPC at [www.hpcheck.org](http://www.hpcheck.org) or by calling 020 7582 0866.

## **SHOULD I HAVE ONE AID OR TWO?**

When you have your hearing tested the dispenser should explain the results and whether you may benefit from a hearing aid.

If you have a hearing loss in both ears, then you will generally do better if both ears are fitted with hearing aids. Two hearing aids can help with sound localisation (telling the direction that sounds are coming from) and they can also improve the ability to understand speech in noisy situations.

## **HOW MUCH WILL A PRIVATE HEARING AID COST?**

The price of hearing aids can range from £500 to more than £4,000 for a pair, depending on the style of the hearing, how sophisticated the models are and what extra features they have.

It is not necessarily the case that the most expensive hearing aids will be the most suitable so you should consider whether certain features are worth the cost. You should be offered a choice of suitable models at different prices, but ask if there are less expensive alternatives or any discounts available.

When you buy hearing aids, you will also have to pay for your hearing aid batteries and any repairs needed once the hearing aid warranty expires.

The life span of a hearing aid may be five or more years.

It is worth remembering that purchasing a private hearing aid does not affect your right to NHS hearing aids, which are free, including batteries.

## **WHAT ARE THE KEY THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN PURCHASING A HEARING AID?**

### **DO**

- Try to use a dispenser who has been recommended by a friend or relative
- Use a locally based dispenser - it might pay to shop around to get the best price and service
- Arrange an appointment at the dispenser's consulting rooms to help you feel more in control of the situation
- Take someone who has good hearing with you
- Make sure you can have the aids for a free trial period (preferably lasting at least 30 days). When you buy hearing aids, the cost is likely to be high and you will need some time to get used to the aids, to trial them in different situations and to see whether they are beneficial. If you ask for a free trial period of this kind and the dispenser will not agree, offering only a guarantee for repairs, go elsewhere. However, many dispensers will make a non-refundable charge for the cost of making earmoulds or custom-made shells for ITE aids.
- Before you purchase, you should expect to have written details the sale. These include:
  1. The make and model of the aids to be supplied
  2. The cash price plus any additional charges
  3. The terms and conditions relating to any trial period

4. The terms of any guarantee
  5. Purchase options
  6. Terms and conditions under which the order may be cancelled
  7. The servicing arrangements (who to contact for batteries, repairs or servicing)
  8. That a follow-up appointment will be arranged within six weeks of the supply of the hearing aids, at no further charge, as your aid may need further adjustment to achieve the best results
- Remember, once you sign an agreement to buy hearing aids you are entering into a legal contract. So, read all documents very carefully and if you are unhappy or unsure about anything do not sign.

## **DON'T**

- Buy hearing aids at an exhibition, through an advertisement or online
- Have a home visit unless you must. Home visits are only permissible if you have requested or agreed an appointment in accordance with the following requirements.
  1. You have requested an appointment for a particular day.
  2. If you are contacted by telephone, you are sent written notice of the appointment and are provided with a pre-paid card or envelope enabling you to decline the offer of a visit
  3. No charge is made for the visit

## **WHAT IF I AM UNHAPPY WITH MY HEARING AIDS?**

If you are dissatisfied with your private aids, you should return to your dispenser.

If you are unhappy and would like to make a complaint about the dispenser/company that sold you your aid, you should contact the Health Professions Council (HPC). The HPC will take action against people who break their regulations and in extreme cases a dispenser may be struck off the register and will then be unable to practice.

## **WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT STYLES OF HEARING AID?**

While there are a number of different styles of aid available to purchase, the suitability of a style will depend on the degree of hearing loss experienced and the hearing frequencies affected as well as other individual needs.

**Behind-the-ear** (BTE) aids sit behind the ear and direct sound into the ear canal via a custom-made earmould. They are suitable for all degrees of hearing loss and are now much smaller and more discreet than older models.

**Open fit aids** are also worn behind the ear, but do not require an earmould. Sound is instead fed into the ear canal via a thin tube with a small dome shaped tip that sits inside the ear. Because an earmould isn't needed users experience more natural sound and better ventilation of the ear. They are available on the NHS as well as privately but are only suitable for milder hearing losses.

**In-the-ear (ITE)** aids come in three different styles, this first one, filling up the 'bowl' of the outer ear. In-the-ear aids can generally be harder to insert and remove, and have smaller controls. They can also be susceptible to damage caused by earwax entering the aid.

**In-the-canal (ITC)** hearing aids are smaller versions of in-the-ear aids and fill only a part of the outer ear.

**Completely-in-the-canal (CIC)** hearing aids are the smallest of the three and sit entirely in the ear canal. They are not suitable for severe hearing losses and don't incorporate directional microphones, which can be a useful feature in noisy environments.

**Receiver-in-the-ear (RITE)** aids have a small part worn behind the ear. They are a more recent development in hearing aid technology and are normally 'open fit' but can also be used with a sealed tip which means they can be suitable for people with more severe hearing loss.

**Body-worn (BW)** aids are an older style of hearing aid not commonly used today. They consist of a small chest worn unit with a lead connecting this to an earphone and earmould.

## **DIGITAL HEARING AIDS**

Great advances have been made in hearing aid technology, particularly with the introduction of digital aids. As well as being able to programme a hearing aid to more closely match a person's hearing loss, digital hearing aids have:

- Directional microphones which can be useful in noisy environments selectively amplify sounds coming from the front, while sounds coming from the sides or rear are amplified much less. This helps the user to pick out the desired voice from the background noise and improve the ability to understand speech. A hearing aid with this feature should have the option to switch to a conventional omni-directional microphone, with a button or switch on the aid or via a remote control. The omni-directional microphone will be more useful in everyday situations where it is important to hear sounds from all around.
- Sophisticated ways of reducing feedback, the whistling that can occur when the sound generated by a hearing aid leaks back to the aid microphone.
- Automatic Gain Control (AGC) to help people affected by loudness recruitment. This enables quieter sounds to be amplified adequately while loud sounds are

prevented from being over amplified. It reduces the need for a volume control to use in different listening situations.

- Two or more channels. This again means that adjusting the volume is not always necessary as the different channels allow the hearing aid response to be tailored to a person's requirements for listening in different environments.
- Noise reduction algorithms designed to improve listening comfort in background noise. Although these do not usually improve speech intelligibility.
- Wireless communication which allows the volume control and program switch on one hearing aid to control both hearing aids.

## **WHO SHOULD I CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION?**

If any of your questions concerning hearing aids have not been answered by reading this information sheet, contact the Deafness Research UK Information Service for further assistance. Our Information team will either answer your enquiry directly or refer it to one of our scientific or medical advisers.

Open: 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m., Monday to Friday (a message can be left at other times)

Freephone: 0808 808 2222

Textphone: 020 7915 1412

E-mail: [info@deafnessresearch.org.uk](mailto:info@deafnessresearch.org.uk)

or click the 'ask question' option from our website homepage and fill in the online question form: [www.deafnessresearch.org.uk](http://www.deafnessresearch.org.uk)

## **USEFUL ORGANISATIONS**

### **Health Professions Council**

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

Website: <http://www.hpc-uk.org/>

### **The Association of Independent Hearing Healthcare Professionals (AIHHP)**

Website: [www.aihhp.net](http://www.aihhp.net)

For information about lipreading classes contact:

### **Association of Teachers of Lipreading to Adults (ATLA)**

C/o Hearing Concern LINK, 19 Hartfield Road, Eastbourne, East Sussex, BN21 2AR

Email: [ATLA@lipreading.org.uk](mailto:ATLA@lipreading.org.uk) Website: [www.lipreading.org.uk](http://www.lipreading.org.uk)

Deafness Research UK is the only national medical research charity dedicated to helping people with deafness, tinnitus or other hearing problems.

Scientists are now predicting that within the next ten to fifteen years there could be a cure for some forms of deafness and much more effective treatments for tinnitus. Deafness Research UK is at the forefront of this work.

You can support us by making a donation or joining the Deafness Research UK League of Friends. For more information call us on 0207 833 1733 or write to:

Deafness Research UK, 330-332 Gray's Inn Rd, London WC1X8EE

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Reviewed: April 2010