



# Getting a Hearing Aid on the NHS

The NHS has been providing digital hearing aids throughout the UK since 2005. They are now provided to all new audiology patients, as older analogue aids are phased out.

While the NHS provides behind-the-ear (BTE) rather than in-the ear (ITE) styles, many are now smaller and more discreet. A newer style of 'open fitting' hearing aid is also available, which uses a thin tube to feed sound into the ear, with a small dome tip replacing a traditional earmould.

If you would like to know how you can obtain a hearing aid on the NHS or are about to visit an NHS Audiologist, Deafness Research UK has put together this information sheet to help you prepare for, and get the most from your appointments.

## WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF HEARING LOSS?

- 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 speaking 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 GET MY HEARING TESTED?**

If you are having difficulty hearing or you believe your hearing has deteriorated, the first step is to visit your GP.

Your doctor will examine your ears and may be able to help by removing wax. If you have a wax build up s/he may prescribe ear drops or suggest the use of olive oil to soften it which will make it easier to remove. Your doctor may also perform some simple hearing tests.

You should mention any relevant symptoms to your GP, such as noises in the ear or difficulties with balance. You should also say if your hearing seems worse in one ear.

If you do not have a wax build up or your hearing is not improved by wax removal, you will be referred to a hospital. Depending on your age and the symptoms you have, your GP may firstly refer you to an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist who after a medical consultation will refer you to an Audiologist. Generally, however, if you are over 60 years of age and meet specific criteria, your GP will refer you directly for hearing tests at a local hospital Audiology department.

Although waiting times for hospital appointments following GP referral used to be very long in some parts of the UK, both the initial diagnosis of a hearing loss and the subsequent fitting of hearing aids should now take place within 18 weeks of the time of referral.

## **WHAT SHOULD I THINK ABOUT PRIOR TO MY APPOINTMENT?**

To help you get the most out of your appointment, it would be a good idea to think about the situations where you have trouble hearing and write them down. For example, do you have difficulty hearing one-to-one, watching television, hearing when you are with several friends, or with certain types of voices? The more information you are able to give the audiologist, the better they will be able to adjust a hearing aid to meet your hearing needs.

You may also ask someone to go with you; this can help the Audiologist adjust the hearing aid to the voice you hear most often. It will also help both of you understand the process involved in getting, using and adjusting to a hearing aid. Remember however, the Audiologist is there to speak to you so don't be afraid to ask him/her to speak more slowly and clearly if you cannot hear.

## **WHAT WILL HAPPEN AT MY APPOINTMENT?**

An Audiologist will ask about your medical history and examine your ears before carrying out an assessment of your hearing in a soundproof room. The main test is to find the quietest sounds you can hear at different frequencies, presented over earphones. Sometimes the test will also be performed with a small vibrating device placed behind your ear to show if the hearing loss is due to a middle ear (conductive hearing loss) or inner ear problem (sensorineural hearing loss), or a combination of both.

The results of this test will be shown on a graph, known as an audiogram. It will show the Audiologist the extent of your hearing loss which they should explain to you.

A hearing loss may be described as mild, meaning difficulty hearing sounds between 20 decibels (dB) and 40dB, moderate - difficulty hearing sounds between 41dB and 70dB, severe - difficulty hearing sounds between 71dB and 95dB or profound - unable to hear sounds louder than 95dB.

Your Audiologist should ask how your hearing is affecting you, and about the situations where you do and don't have difficulty hearing. This will also help to determine if you would benefit from hearing aid(s) and if so how they should be programmed.

They may then take impression of your ears so that earmoulds can be custom made. In this case you will be asked to return, usually a few weeks later, for the aid(s) to be fitted. However, if you have a mild to moderate hearing loss you may be suitable for an open fitting hearing aid which can be fitted in one appointment.

When your hearing aid(s) are fitted, you will be shown how to insert and maintain them, how to operate the controls and how to change the batteries. You will also be given advice to help you get used to using your aid and to help you obtain the most benefit from it.

## **WHAT CAN I EXPECT FROM MY DIGITAL HEARING AID?**

Your hearing aid(s) should help by amplifying the sounds you have difficulty hearing without making sounds uncomfortably loud. They should help you to discriminate sounds, particularly speech and in difficult listening situations. They should also be comfortable to wear.

While great advances have been made in hearing aid technology, and hearing aids continue to develop, it is important to remember that even using the most advanced technology available today, hearing aids are only an aid to hearing and will not restore perfect hearing.

If you have a mild hearing loss your hearing aid(s) may provide both increased clarity and amplification, but the greater a hearing loss, the less a hearing aid can do. This is because as deterioration occurs in the inner ear, it cannot separate sounds as effectively.

## **WHAT HAPPENS ONCE I HAVE MY HEARING AID(S)?**

When you have your hearing aid(s) you should be offered a follow up appointment. This usually takes place 6 weeks after the fitting of the hearing aids, and is usually conducted face to face, although some services offer telephone follow ups. The purpose of the appointment is to check on your progress and for the Audiologist to help you with any initial problems you have encountered as you have started wearing your hearing aids. For example, you may still have trouble hearing individual voices in noisy situations, or sometimes the aid may amplify sound too much, in which case your Audiologist can make adjustments to the programming of the hearing aid(s). They can also make adjustments to your earmould and give further information about getting used to, and looking after your hearing aid(s).

If your hearing aid or earmould needs repairing, you may or may not need an appointment, depending on local policy. This is the same when you need a replacement of your earmould tubing. You do not need an appointment to get new hearing aid batteries. These are supplied free of charge from your local Audiology department. They may also be available from local GP surgeries and health centres.

## **HOW DO I GET THE MOST OUT OF MY HEARING AID?**

### **Be patient and persevere**

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 find you can hear quiet background sounds, such as noise from electric fans, which may be annoying. Remember that the ability to hear soft sounds will be helpful when you are trying to understand quiet speech and as you continue to wear your hearing aid, your brain will learn not to focus as much on these sounds.

It may also take time to adjust to wearing a hearing aid. If it seems uncomfortable build up the amount of time you wear the aid for each day.

### **Try it in a range of situations**

In the first few weeks, try out your hearing aid in a wide range of situations and locations to test how it is working. However, try out your hearing aid in quiet situations first such as one-on-one conversations until you are accustomed to the new sounds. Then try it in noisier environments such as in a restaurant. These are only general guidelines and your Audiologist may recommend a slightly different approach to trying out your hearing aid(s).

Here are five situations where you need to try your new hearing aid(s):

1. in the quiet of your home
2. in conversation with another person in a quiet room
3. listening to the radio or television

4. in group conversations
5. using the telephone

### **Request a further Audiology appointment**

Although after a follow up Audiology appointment you will not normally be sent another, if you continue to have trouble with your hearing aid(s) and this stops you using it in all the situations you want, you should request an appointment. Hearing aids are sophisticated pieces of equipment and it does take time and care to adjust a hearing aid to best suit a person's hearing loss. Don't give up and leave your hearing aid sitting in a drawer.

### **Ask about hearing therapy**

If you continue to have problems adjusting to your aid and difficulties coping with your hearing loss, you may be able to get further support from a hearing therapist. A hearing therapist can help improve communication skills and provide information about equipment to assist with things like television and using the telephone. Many hospitals have hearing therapists and you could ask your GP or your local Audiology department whether you could be referred to one.

### **Consider lipreading**

Many people with a hearing loss find lipreading a great benefit. You can obtain details of local lipreading classes from the Association of Teachers of Lipreading to Adults (details given below) or from your local Audiology department.

### **Communication equipment**

There are a wide range of assistive devices available, including TV listening devices, amplified telephones, telephones that use text instead of sound, and flashing or vibrating alarm clocks and doorbells. Some of these devices are used with a hearing aid, whilst others are used on their own. Social services may help to pay for, or provide, equipment. For more information contact your local social services department. There are also a number of suppliers from whom you can purchase equipment. See contact details below.

### **Find out about further support**

There are a number of charities that offer a range of support. For example the charity Hearing Concern Link (see contact details below) has hearing advisors who can talk to you about your hearing loss as well as help with the practical issues of looking after your hearing aid.

## **HOW CAN I GET A PRIVATE HEARING AID?**

If you decide you want a particular type of hearing aid not available through the NHS, you want a hearing aid with the latest features or you want to obtain a hearing aid more quickly than may be possible on the NHS, then you may consider going to a private hearing aid dispenser. Some NHS Audiology clinics have links with private clinics and may be able to offer guidance, you can also contact the Deafness Research UK Information Service for the information sheet- A guide to buying hearing aids.

## FURTHER 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)

## WHO SHOULD I CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION?

### 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)

### Hearing Concern LINK

19 Hartfield Road, Eastbourne, East Sussex, BN21 2AR

Tel: 01323 638230 / Textphone: 01323 739998

Email: [info@hearingconcernlink.org](mailto:info@hearingconcernlink.org) Website: [www.hearingconcernlink.org.uk](http://www.hearingconcernlink.org.uk)

### RNID Shop

1 Haddonbrook Business Centre, Orton Southgate, Peterborough PE2 6YX

Tel: 0870 789 8855 / Textphone: 01733 238020

Email: [solutions@rnid.org.uk](mailto:solutions@rnid.org.uk) / Website: [www.rnid.org.uk/shop](http://www.rnid.org.uk/shop)

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 Charity no. 326915

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