



# Getting a Hearing Aid on the NHS

The roll-out of NHS digital hearing aids throughout the UK was completed in 2005. However in some areas waiting lists to obtain them are still very long, though efforts are being made to bring these down. According to figures from The Department of Health in 2007, there are currently some 126,750 people waiting for an audiological assessment. While the basic style of NHS aids has not changed in that most aids are still behind-the-ear models, many are much smaller than before.

If you are waiting to get a hearing aid, or are about to visit an NHS audiologist, Deafness Research UK has put together this factsheet to help you prepare for, and get the most from, your appointments. It also tells you how new technology is likely to improve hearing aids in the future.

If you think you might need hearing aids, the first thing to do is visit your family doctor (GP) to get a referral.

## **HOW DO I KNOW THAT I'VE GOT A HEARING PROBLEM? WHAT SIGNS DO I LOOK OUT FOR?**

- 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 IS THE PROCESS OF GETTING HEARING AIDS?**

If you are having difficulty hearing and think you might benefit from hearing aids, visit your family doctor, who may refer you to an audiology (hearing aid) department depending on local arrangements and what other symptoms you may have. Don't forget to mention all possible relevant symptoms to your GP and specialist, for example, if you are experiencing noises in the ear or having difficulties with balance.

All NHS ENT and Audiology departments will have a waiting period. If your GP refers you to an audiologist, you will go on a waiting list for an appointment. UK citizens and residents are entitled to free hearing aids through the NHS. However, if you are in a hurry to get aids, or want a particular type of aid that is not available through the NHS, an alternative is to go to a private hearing aid dispenser or audiology department. Some NHS audiology clinics have links with private clinics and may be able to offer guidance, or you can contact the Deafness Research UK Information Service for a factsheet on Choosing a Hearing Aid.

### **Initial testing**

At your first audiology appointment, your medical history will be taken, your ears will be examined and your hearing tested. The main test is to find out the quietest sounds that you can hear at different pitches or frequencies, presented either over earphones or via a vibrator attached to your head. Additionally, a detailed questionnaire of your listening needs will normally be carried out. These simple tests will determine whether you need one hearing aid or two. If you need an aid, an impression of your ear will be taken, which will be used to create the earmould for your hearing aid. You will return several weeks later to get your aid fitted. If you have a hearing loss in both ears (bilateral) which would benefit from two hearing aids, you should be offered two. Initially, you may be given one to get used to or you may be given both together.

At the initial appointment you will be asked a list of questions about your hearing to help determine how best to adjust your aid for different situations. Ask your audiologist to print out a copy for you so that you are able to monitor the situations where you have difficulty hearing. Keep a list of all the different situations you have difficulty hearing in and tell the audiologist at your fitting appointment.

The more information you can give the audiologist about the different situations that you have difficulty hearing in, or hear well in, the better they will be able to adjust the hearing aid for your individual needs.

### **Fitting**

Once your hearing aid is ready, you will return for a fitting appointment.

- Your aid will be chosen to suit the degree and type of hearing loss you have.
- You will be shown how to put in the earmould.
- You will also be shown how to operate the controls and how to change the batteries.
- Your audiologist will help you to manage your hearing loss, improve your communication skills and enable you to participate fully in daily activities.

## **Follow up care**

You will have a follow-up appointment around 6 – 12 weeks after your fitting appointment. Here you can discuss any problems you may be experiencing and any necessary adjustments will be made to the earmould and/or the programming of the hearing aid. For example, you may still have trouble hearing individual voices in noisy situations, or the aid may be amplifying sound too much in some situations. At this appointment, you may also get further information about getting used to, and looking after, the hearing aid.

After your follow-up appointment you will not normally be sent another audiological appointment unless you request one. However, some audiology departments conduct a routine follow up after a period of one or two years.

If you are not happy with the sounds the hearing aid produces and this is stopping you using it in all the situations you want to, you should request another appointment to make further adjustments to your hearing aid.

## **Ongoing support**

- You don't usually need an appointment to get new hearing aid batteries. Check with your local department when facilities are available as opening times can vary. These are supplied free of charge from your local audiology department and may be available from local GP surgeries and health centres.
- If you have ongoing problems adjusting to your hearing aid, check if there is a hearing therapist in your area. They can offer ongoing support in helping you to manage your hearing loss, improve your communication skills and enable you to participate fully in daily activities. You can be referred by your family doctor or check with your local audiology department.
- If your hearing aid or earmould needs repairing you may or may not need an appointment, depending on local policy.

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

While great advances are being made in hearing aid technology, particularly with the introduction of digital aids, care and time needs to be taken to ensure your hearing aid settings are correct.

Hearing aids are very sophisticated pieces of machinery and it will take time for your ears to adjust to hearing improved sounds. To get the best out of them, you need to give the audiologist the right information at each appointment, to ensure your hearing aids are adjusted as well as possible to suit your needs.

You should remember that hearing aids are only an **aid** to hearing and will not restore perfect hearing. Deterioration occurs within the ear, so the ear can no longer separate sounds effectively. Therefore, even using the most advanced technology available today, hearing cannot be fully restored.

Your hearing aid will amplify voices and sounds and you will be able to hear voices better in quiet places. It will allow you to hear sounds you may not have heard for a long time, which will take time to get used to. It is important to continue wearing the aid so that you become accustomed to the new or louder sounds – keep working at it.

You may find that you can hear quiet background sounds, such as noise from electric fans, which may initially be annoying. Remember that people with normal hearing may be annoyed by these sounds too, and the ability to hear soft sounds will be helpful when you are trying to understand quiet speech.

Remember to be patient as it **will** take time to get used to the new sounds in quiet situations. Don't try your aid out in noisy situations until your ears have had time to adjust.

## **BE PREPARED**

### **Before your first audiology appointment**

- It is best to take the person you have the most conversation with along too, particularly if you are worried about being able to hear the audiologist. This will help the audiologist adjust the hearing aid to the voice you hear most often, and you will both understand the process involved in getting, using and adjusting to, your hearing aid.
- Ask the audiologist to speak slowly and more clearly if you cannot hear them.
- Think about which situations you have trouble hearing in. For example, one-to-one, watching television, hearing when you are with several friends, certain types of voices?

### **What to expect at your first appointment**

- It will be explained what tests you are having.
- It will be explained if you need a hearing aid in one or both ears and why.
- Your audiologist will write down the name and type of hearing aid you are getting, and whether it is a digital or analogue aid.
- Your audiologist will show you your audiogram and explain the extent of your hearing loss.
- Your audiologist will show you how to care for your aid and how it works.

### **Once you have your aid**

- Take things slowly. Allow sufficient time for your ears to adjust to your hearing aid – both to the earmould and the new sounds you will hear.
- In the first few weeks, try out your hearing aid in a wide range of situations and locations to test how it is working. First try your hearing aid out in quiet situations, such as one-on-one conversations until you are accustomed to the new sounds. Then try it in noisier environments such as a busy road or restaurant. These are only general guidelines. Your audiologist may recommend a slightly different approach to trying out your hearing aid.

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

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
- Do not give up. If it is taking time to get used to your hearing aid, continue to try it in quiet places as well as noisier environments.
  - Many audiology services also offer ongoing hearing therapy for people who would like further help with managing their hearing loss. This may include counselling, advice on equipment to help with things like the TV and the telephone, and information on other sources of help.
  - If you are still having trouble after your second appointment, get another appointment to see your audiologist.

## **DEAFNESS RESEARCH UK BRINGS HOPE FOR THE FUTURE**

Technology is always improving, and Deafness Research UK is supporting several ground-breaking research projects, aimed at improving hearing aid and testing technology.

### **Communicating more effectively in noisy environments**

The majority of hard of hearing people find it difficult to communicate successfully in noisy environments, regardless of the type of hearing aid they have. One Deafness Research UK scientist, Professor David McAlpine, is working to discover the precise hearing mechanisms by which humans process complex sounds, so that cochlear implants and hearing aids can be modified in ways which will help hard of hearing people to communicate more effectively in noisy backgrounds.

### **Improving evaluation and fitting procedures**

Deafness Research UK researcher, Professor Brian Moore, based in Cambridge, is working to improve the fitting of hearing aids by developing more accurate ways of measuring hearing loss at different frequencies. Because the impaired cochlea cannot process sounds effectively, even with new technology, amplifying sounds accurately is challenging. As hearing does not generally deteriorate evenly across all frequencies (pitches), a hearing aid should provide more amplification in the frequencies where it is needed. However, in some people, sounds at certain frequencies either cannot be heard even when highly amplified or are heard with distorted pitch and tone quality. People affected in this way are said to have “dead” hearing regions; to understand speech well, people need to hear both high and low frequencies well. Therefore people with dead regions need more sophisticated hearing aids.

This project, supported by the Grand Charity of Freemasons, aims to devise a set of signals which it is hoped can be incorporated into standard testing procedures to enable accurate diagnosis of patterns of hearing loss and identification of “dead” regions.

## Other research

Other research being carried out includes looking at improving the look of hearing aids, communication between bilateral hearing aids and speech perception.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Deafness Research UK also produces information on obtaining hearing aids from a private dispenser in a factsheet called 'Choosing a Hearing Aid'

If any of your questions concerning hearing aids have not been answered by reading this factsheet, 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:

[www.deafnessresearch.org.uk](http://www.deafnessresearch.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  
Charity no. 326915

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