



Help for your hearing loss

This guide has been produced for people whose hearing is not as good as it used to be and who suspect that they should be doing something about it. It will also help those who have a friend or relative whom they feel might need some encouragement to seek help.

The first thing to remember if you suspect your hearing is not what it used to be is that you are by no means alone. Hearing loss affects around nine million people in the UK – that's one in seven people – and while half of people over 60 experience hearing loss it is not just confined to the older age groups - a hearing problem can develop at any age.

The causes of hearing loss are various and include a noisy working environment, military service and, increasingly, the effects of loud music. Poor hearing may simply be 'in the family'. Because we live in such a noisy world, many people are losing their hearing in their 40's or 50's whereas, previously, such problems usually became noticeable from the age of 60 onwards.

However, there are plenty of things that can be done about your hearing loss and good reasons not to delay taking action. Consider how many social occasions you may have missed out on recently, or not enjoyed as much as you would have liked because you felt embarrassed about not being able to hear properly.

If you do nothing both you and your family and friends will find your hearing loss increasingly frustrating. Research has also shown that the quicker you get a hearing aid once a hearing loss is confirmed, the more benefit you will gain from it.

What are the signs of hearing loss?

Most hearing loss occurs very gradually and you may not be aware that your hearing is deteriorating – in fact your friends and family are likely to notice your hearing problems before you do.

Any of the following are signs that you might benefit from having your hearing tested and your hearing problems managed:

- You are beginning to find it difficult to hear conversation when you are in a group or where there is background noise
- You may have difficulty understanding the higher pitched voices of women and children. Higher pitched consonants such as 'f', 'k', 'p', 's', 'sh', and 't' may be out of your hearing range
- Those around you have commented on the need to raise their voices or repeat phrases when talking to you
- You complain that people are mumbling and not speaking clearly
- You have to turn the TV or radio volume higher than may be acceptable to other family members or friends
- You have to concentrate increasingly hard to follow a conversation, which is tiring

What causes hearing loss?

Permanent hearing loss is most commonly associated with getting older, but a range of factors can have an influence. Prolonged exposure to loud noise may hasten the onset of a noticeable hearing loss. Generally this happens when people work in a noisy environment or are regularly exposed to loud music from clubbing or a personal music player. Occasionally, a noise is so loud that it damages the ear and causes an immediate loss of hearing. Some medications can also cause hearing to deteriorate.

Temporary hearing loss can be caused by a build up of earwax, an infection, glue ear or obstruction by a foreign body in the ear.

Why should I consider a hearing aid?

Hearing aids have been improving for some time and digital technology and other technical advances mean that today's hearing aids can be matched to your hearing loss more closely than was the case with the older, analogue, models. Built-in 'directional' microphones can help to pick out voices.

Deafness Research UK has been at the forefront of developing new hearing aid technology and is supporting research that will help improve it still further. A hearing aid can greatly improve your communication with family and friends, and your social life. It is important not to delay taking action. Research has shown that the earlier you get a hearing aid the more benefit you will gain from it.

What kinds of hearing aids are available?

There are a number of different types of aid available. These include the behind the ear (BTE), in the ear (ITE), in the canal (ITC) and the completely in the canal

(CIC), as well as two newer types called open fit and receiver in the canal (RITE).

Whatever aid you have, it will be tuned to match your particular hearing loss. It will increase the tones you have trouble hearing so that you can hear a wide range of sounds but without any of them being uncomfortably loud. It can suppress some annoying kinds of background noise and avoid feedback – the high-pitched whistle common in older hearing aids. You will be able to switch to different settings for different listening conditions.

Getting a hearing aid on the NHS

Digital hearing aids available through the NHS use the same technology as hearing aids available privately and so will be as effective at meeting your hearing needs.

The hearing aid most commonly supplied by the NHS is a behind the ear model. The first step is to visit your GP who will check for any relevant medical or obvious problems such as an infection or earwax. If you are referred to hospital for an aid, your hearing will be assessed in a soundproof room and a chart, called an audiogram, which shows your particular hearing loss, will be produced. A wax impression of your ear may also be taken if an ear mould is required.

At your fitting appointment, you will be shown how to insert your hearing aid and be given advice on how to gain the maximum benefit from it. A follow-up appointment will be arranged for you, around four to six weeks afterwards. The NHS has also introduced Hearing Direct, a telephone follow-up service and patient helpline.

You can obtain more detailed information about getting an NHS hearing aid from Deafness Research UK.

Should I consider a private hearing aid?

There are various reasons why some people prefer to get a hearing aid privately. Although NHS waiting times are now a lot shorter, a private hearing test and hearing aid may be obtained more quickly. Having a private aid does not affect your right to a free of- charge NHS aid.

Smaller hearing aids are more readily available privately, particularly the in-the-ear and in-the-canal models, and the more expensive aids offer additional features.

The price of hearing aids can range from £500 to more than £4,000 for a pair. You should also consider the future costs of repairing and replacing private hearing aids. The price should also include after-care and follow-up appointments.

Checklist for getting a private aid:

- Visit your GP first in case you have a relevant medical problem
- Check that the hearing aid dispenser is registered with the Health Professions Council (HPC) at www.hpcheck.org or call 020 7582 0866.

- Shop around and compare prices and services
- Demand a minimum 28-day money back guarantee. Most retailers will offer 60 days
- Don't have a home visit unless you must
- Take someone who has good hearing with you. The buying decision you are making is an important one, and you need to be clear what you are getting for your money

Tactics for good hearing

Whatever your situation, there are tactics you can use immediately to help with your hearing loss. Share the following with family and friends and help them communicate better with you:

- **Use your eyes** - Make sure you can see the face of the person you are talking with and that the light is falling on their face. Watch their lips – they give vital information about what is being said. Keep a distance between you of three to six feet.
- **Body language** - Take note of the speaker's facial expressions and gestures, and also their tone of voice and speed of talking. These all give clues to the speaker's topic, attitude, mood and feelings.
- **Controlling and coping with noise** - When having a conversation, try to keep the background noise to a minimum. A quiet room with soft furnishings is best.
- **Listening to radio or television** - Adjust the tone controls to achieve the best sound balance for you. It is usually easier to understand speech with more treble, but music may be most enjoyable with more bass.
- **Keep calm** - Do not expect to hear every word.
- **Conversational skills** - In any conversation, the speaker needs some reaction from the listener. Frown, look puzzled or ask questions if you have not heard clearly.
- **Helping others to help you** - Be prepared to tell strangers that you have difficulty hearing. Explain as precisely as possible what factors make it difficult to hear.
- **Be positive** - Always show appreciation when people have shown consideration of your difficulties.

Finally some frequently asked questions

What do I tell my GP?

If you are nervous or uncomfortable about visiting your GP, prepare notes in advance. This will help you give a clear description of your hearing loss and how it affects your life. Any other relevant symptoms such as tinnitus or dizziness should also be mentioned. If your hearing loss has occurred suddenly or over period of no more than three days, you should contact your GP immediately.

Do I need two hearing aids?

For most people with a hearing loss, both ears will be affected in which case the greatest benefit will be gained from having an aid in each ear.

Are there other devices that can help?

There are a number of devices which help to keep people who are hard of hearing safe and in-touch. Some are used in conjunction with a hearing aid, others on their own. Devices that work independently of a hearing aid include TV listening devices, amplified telephones, telephones that use text instead of sound, and flashing or vibrating alarm clocks and doorbells. You may be able to get these through Social Services (your NHS audiology service should be able to refer you), but they can also be bought privately.

Once you have a hearing aid, you can take advantage of loop systems that are installed in certain public places to help the hearing aid to work better. If you are not sure whether a loop system is installed, ask whoever is in charge.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

If you have any questions concerning hearing loss which have not been answered by reading this guide, 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

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