

**Getting hearing aids**  
Your hearing test and  
what happens if you  
need hearing aids

**ACTION ON**  
**HEARING**  
**LOSS**

I

HEAR



YOU

In this leaflet we tell you how to get hearing aids. But if you've got more questions, our friendly helpline team is waiting to answer your call or email.

**Telephone 0808 808 0123**

**Textphone 0808 808 9000**

**Email [information@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:information@hearingloss.org.uk)**

### Getting hearing aids

#### **You will find this leaflet helpful if:**

- your GP says you need further hearing tests
- you think you may need hearing aids
- you have just got your first hearing aids.

#### **It outlines:**

- 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
- the different types of hearing aid you can get.

### 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. If you are buying hearing aids privately you will be seen by a hearing aid dispenser.

In this leaflet we refer to dispensers and NHS audiologists as 'audiologists'.

Before the audiologist tests your hearing, they will ask you some questions about your hearing and check your ears. 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. They will test one ear and then the other. You have to press a button each

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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.

The audiologist may then 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 audiologist compares the results 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 they test your other ear. Then they may give you another test where you listen to sentences or words and repeat what you hear. This shows how well you are hearing the detailed sound patterns of speech.

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, the audiologist will offer you 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 do hearing aids do?

Hearing aids make sounds louder and clearer so that you hear them comfortably. They are battery-operated and you put them in or behind your ear. Hearing aids come 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.

### How do hearing aids work?

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. The audiologist will program your hearing aids to suit your own hearing needs.

Some models have different settings you can switch to for different listening situations: quiet places, noisy places, listening to music, and so on. Often, models adjust themselves automatically in different environments.

### Will hearing aids give me perfect hearing?

No they won't, but they should make sounds loud enough for you to hear at a comfortable level. They should make conversation easier and may help you hear on the telephone, which should increase your confidence when you are 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 (noise in the ears), you may hear it less when you use hearing aids. See page 16 to find out more about our range of free information on tinnitus.

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

This 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 comfortably for most of the day. This may take up to three months, so you will need to be patient.

When you get your hearing aids, the audiologist should advise you how to get the best from them. They should also show you how to use them and look after them. Always ask for more help if you need it to ensure you get the most out of your hearing aids.

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

However, you may only need one hearing aid if:

- you only have a hearing loss in one ear
- one ear is much worse than the other
- you have chronic infections in one ear.

### 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, at the moment, in some parts of the country, the wait is longer.

Once you are seen by an NHS audiologist, you may then have to wait up to three months before you have your hearing aids fitted. See our factsheet *Getting hearing aids*.

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

With the NHS, you can't 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 is small and neat, fits comfortably and suits your particular hearing loss.

Some people prefer to buy hearing aids privately so that they can have more choice.

### How are hearing aids fitted?

The NHS generally fits behind-the-ear (BTE) hearing aids although other styles are now available. Some BTE models have an earmould connected to the main part of the hearing aid.

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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 on pages 11-13.

If you need earmoulds, the audiologist will take impressions of your ears so that the moulds can be made to fit your ears snugly. They will ask you to come back 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.

The hospital should offer you a follow-up interview to check that your hearing aids are helping you and you're not having any problems using them. Sometimes they will need to fine tune your hearing aids 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. On the NHS, if you need more powerful hearing aids, or new ones, you will not have to pay for them. NHS hearing aids are free and so are new earmoulds, tubing, batteries and, normally, repairs. However, if you lose or damage your hearing aids, the hospital may ask you 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 Health Professions Council, which regulates dispensers' training and conduct, and handles complaints.

Health Professions Council  
Telephone 020 7840 9815  
Fax 020 7820 9815  
[www.hpc-uk.org](http://www.hpc-uk.org)

See our factsheet *Getting hearing aids* for more information.

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. A big difference is that you 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?

Hearing aids cost between £300 and £3,000 each if you have them fitted privately. However, this does not mean that getting one for each ear 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 available as standard on the NHS. They 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. See our leaflet about making the most of your hearing aids for information on how to care for your hearing aids and what to do if you have problems with them.

### 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?

Your audiologist 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 type of hearing aid and most people who get NHS hearing aids have one of these (see pic a).



BTE hearing aids with an 'open ear fitting' have a small, soft earpiece at the tip of the tubing instead of an earmould (see pic b). 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 (see pic c). 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 kinds of aids – 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 (see picture). 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.

See our leaflet on making the most of your hearing aids to learn about other types of hearing aids, such as body-worn hearing aids, bone-conduction hearing aids and CROS/BiCROS hearing aids.

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

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

It can take quite a while 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 you and, in good 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 programme that you can use for noisy places, so make sure you know how to change programmes. Some hearing aids are designed to automatically adjust when there's a lot of noise.

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, get the best out of them in the long run. Don't be afraid to tell people that you have difficulty hearing, and explain how they can help, such as by facing you and speaking clearly, or perhaps a bit more slowly.

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

### The loop setting

Most hearing aids have a listening programme that you can switch to for loop listening. When you get your hearing aids, ask if they have a loop setting. On older hearing aid models, the loop setting is at a switch position marked T.



On the loop setting, your hearing aids can pick up sound from listening equipment, such as a loop system. This equipment transfers sound directly to your hearing aids, cutting out most background noise.

When you get your hearing aids, ask if they have a loop setting. Some hearing aids now come with Bluetooth adaptors so that you can have a wireless link between your hearing aids and telephone, TV or audio equipment.

### Batteries

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 the audiologist fits your hearing aids, they should give you written instructions about how to look after them. If you are not sure about any of the information, ask your audiologist for advice. See our leaflet about making the most of your hearing aids for more information.

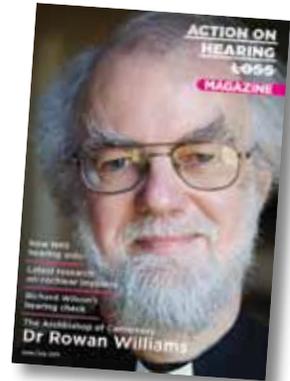


## Want to know more?

Are you affected by hearing loss or tinnitus? Joining Action on Hearing Loss is a great way to:

- keep updated on developments
- find out about the new products that can help
- hear about the latest information and advice
- 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. If you're retired, membership costs just £15 a year.



## How to join

Complete the form on the reverse and return to us.

Alternatively:

- visit [www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/leafletjoin](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/leafletjoin) or
- call 0845 634 0679 (telephone) or 020 7296 8001 ext. 8256 (textphone)
- email [membership@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:membership@hearingloss.org.uk)

Contact us for more information:

**Action on Hearing Loss**  
**19-23 Featherstone Street**  
**London EC1Y 8SL**

**[membership@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:membership@hearingloss.org.uk)**  
**[www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/leafletjoin](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/leafletjoin)**

## Yes, I want to join

# **ACTION ON HEARING LOSS**

Title (Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss) \_\_\_\_\_

First name \_\_\_\_\_

Surname \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Postcode \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ Textphone \_\_\_\_\_

## Please accept my membership payment:

(tick relevant boxes)

£22 standard rate

£15 if you are retired, unwaged or a full-time student

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

### Payment method:

I enclose a cheque/PO made payable to  
Action on Hearing Loss (delete as appropriate)

I prefer to pay by credit card/debit card/CharityCard  
(delete as appropriate)

Card number

Start date   /   Expiry date   /

Issue number (if present)   Security number

(last 3 digits on signature strip)

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Please return this form to: Action on Hearing Loss,  
FREEPOST LON13186, London EC1B 1AL

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)
- **Cochlear implants** (factsheet)
- **Buying hearing aids?** (factsheet)

Read our leaflets (right) about ear health and products to help with hearing loss.

We also have a range of factsheets and leaflets about tinnitus. Please contact our 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 the charity taking action on hearing loss since 1911. We can't do this without your help.**

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**To find out more about what we do and how you can support us go to [www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk)**

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**Telephone 0808 808 0123**

**Textphone 0808 808 9000**

**Email [information@hearingloss.org.uk](mailto:information@hearingloss.org.uk)**

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