

All about hearing aids



About this leaflet

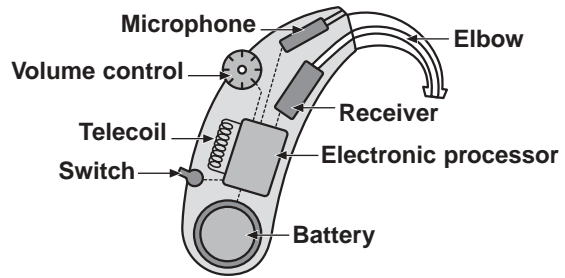
In this leaflet we tell you everything you need to know about hearing aids.

It is written for people who think they may need a hearing aid. It will also help you if you have just got your first hearing aid and want to know more about it.

If you already have a hearing aid, you will also find helpful information about using and looking after your hearing aid.

The following information is included in this leaflet:

- What is a hearing aid?
- How to get a hearing aid
- Getting a hearing aid on the NHS
- Buying your own hearing aid
- What types of hearing aid are available?
- Digital hearing aids
- How to use your hearing aid
- Looking after your hearing aid
- When something goes wrong



What is a hearing aid?

A hearing aid makes sounds louder so that you are able to hear them. It is battery-operated and you usually put it in or around your ear. Hearing aids are available in different shapes, sizes and types. However, all hearing aids work in a similar way.

Very simply, all hearing aids have a built-in microphone which picks up sound. This sound is processed electronically either by analogue circuits or digitally to make the sound more audible. 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.

A hearing aid also has an earmould – the part that goes in your ear – tubing and batteries for power.

The type of hearing aid you get will depend, for example, on your hearing loss and what you find comfortable. We tell you more about different types of hearing aid later.

All hearing aids have a built-in microphone to pick up sound



A hearing aid won't give you perfect hearing but it may make conversations easier

What you can expect from your hearing aid

A hearing aid won't give you perfect hearing. It will make sounds louder and may help you to hear on the telephone, make conversations easier and, as a result, increase your confidence when talking to other people.

A hearing aid will not make your hearing worse. If you have tinnitus – hissing, buzzing or other noises in your ears or head – you will probably hear it less when you use a hearing aid.

It takes time to get used to a hearing aid. However, it pays to persevere with your hearing aid until you are happy with it. Until you get used to using it in a lot of different situations, you won't know if it suits you. When you get your hearing aid, you should be given advice on how to get the best from it. You will probably need more help as time goes on. You should also be shown how to use it and look after it.

We tell you more about this later.

How to get a hearing aid

The first thing you need to do is get your ears and hearing checked to confirm you have a hearing loss and to see if a hearing aid will help. Your hearing difficulty may need medical investigation and treatment so it is a good idea to see your GP (family doctor) first, even if you are thinking of buying a hearing aid privately.

In the UK you can get a hearing aid free of charge on the NHS or buy it privately. Buying your own hearing aid is expensive so you may prefer to try the NHS route to getting a hearing aid first. We tell you about the advantages and disadvantages with both options later.

To get a hearing aid on the NHS, you first need to visit your GP. He or she will refer you to an ear, nose and throat (ENT) consultant or an audiologist at a hospital near you. If you are over 60, your GP may refer you direct to an audiology department so you won't have to go to ENT first.

If you prefer to buy your hearing aid, you can go straight to a private hearing aid dispenser. He or she should tell you if you need to see your GP about your hearing loss.



Visit your GP to get your ears and hearing checked

Getting a hearing aid on the NHS

If your GP refers you to an ENT consultant, you will usually be seen in a hospital. Here, the ENT consultant will examine your ears and ask about your medical history, including any family deafness. You will then see an audiologist who will test your hearing using an 'audiometer'. The audiometer produces sounds of differing frequencies (pitch) and levels of loudness. You tell the audiologist which sounds you can hear and the results are shown on a chart called an audiogram. From this, the audiologist will be able to tell if a hearing aid will help you.

If you need a hearing aid, the audiologist will take an impression of your ear to make an earmould to fit in your ear. Some clinics may offer you one hearing aid for each ear, though policy about this varies from clinic to clinic. It is a good idea to try two hearing aids as many people do better with two aids than just one.

You will get your new hearing aid a few weeks later when the earmould is ready. The audiologist will adjust your hearing aid to suit you and show you how to use and look after it. You will also get written information about this.

If your hearing aid is a digital one, you may be asked to come back to have it fine-tuned when you have tried it out in different situations. You should, in any case, be given a follow-up appointment within three months to discuss how you are getting on with your hearing aid.

The advantage of an NHS hearing aid is that it is free. So are new earmoulds, tubing and batteries and, normally, repairs.

Hearing aids last on average about five years. At some time, you may need a more powerful hearing aid – in either case, you will not have to pay for your new hearing aid. However, if you lose or damage your hearing aid, you may be asked to pay something towards repairs or a replacement.

The disadvantages of an NHS hearing aid are that you may have to wait several weeks or even months for a first appointment and then some more time for your hearing aid. You cannot always choose which style of hearing aid you get. However, the NHS does have a range of hearing aids, and you should be able to get one that suits your hearing loss.

For further information, see RNID's factsheet, *The NHS hearing aid service*.

Buying your own hearing aid

To buy your own hearing aid, you need to find a private hearing aid dispenser. The best way to find one is to get a recommendation from your GP or a friend. By law, all hearing aid dispensers must be qualified – or in supervised training – and registered with the Hearing Aid Council, which regulates dispensers' training and conduct and handles complaints. The RNID Information Line can give you a list of hearing aid dispensers in your area, but cannot recommend one.

In some ways, getting your hearing aid privately is similar to getting one on the NHS. Your hearing will be tested and your hearing aid dispenser will show you how to use and look after your aid. You will, however, have to sign a contract agreeing to buy your hearing aid. Make sure you see the terms and conditions of this contract before you have your hearing test and find out about any money-back guarantee. Ideally, you should get at least 28 days to try out the hearing aid and be able to return it during this time if you are not satisfied with it.

For further information, see RNID's factsheet, *Buying a hearing aid?*

One advantage of getting a private hearing aid is that you can choose the style of hearing aid you want. Some types of hearing aid – such as canal aids – are not available on the NHS (see later). At present, digital hearing aids are available only through selected NHS hospitals (see later).

Your hearing aid dispenser will probably see you straight away and you will be able to get your hearing aid within about two weeks.

The disadvantages of buying privately are that hearing aids are expensive and cost between £300 and £2,500. If you buy a hearing aid for each ear, you will have to pay almost double. Medical insurance may cover part of the cost of a hearing aid, but check with your insurer first. When the guarantee runs out, you will also have to pay for repairs and the costs of this 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 will also need to insure your hearing aid against loss, theft or damage if you buy it privately.



Very small hearing aids fit right inside your ear and cannot be seen from the outside

What types of hearing aid are available?

Hearing aids are described as analogue or digital, depending on the technology they use to process sound. Digital hearing aids are the newest kind of hearing aid. They contain a tiny computer to process sound. Many types of hearing aid are available:

- **Behind-the-ear (BTE) hearing aids** have an earmould, which sits inside your ear. The hearing aid itself 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 get one of these.
- **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. They tend to need repairing more often than BTE aids. Some ITE aids can be seen from the side. The smallest canal aids fit right inside your ear canal, where they cannot be seen. If you have severe hearing loss, or very small ear canals, canal aids will probably not suit you.

- **Body-worn hearing aids** consist of a small box that you clip to your clothes or put in your pocket. It is connected by a lead to an earphone and earmould. They are not often used but are less fiddly than smaller types. Some body-worn aids are very powerful.
- **Bone conduction hearing aids** are for people with conductive hearing loss or people who cannot wear a conventional hearing aid. They deliver sound through the skull by vibrations. One type involves a small operation behind the ear to fix a vibrating part.
- **CROS/BiCROS hearing aids** are for people with no hearing in one ear. CROS hearing aids feed sound from the side with no hearing to the good ear. BiCROS aids amplify sound from both sides and feed it into the ear that has some hearing.
- **Disposable hearing aids** may be an option for you if you are wondering if a hearing aid will help you. They are suitable only for people with mild to moderate hearing loss. They can be thrown away when the battery runs out, usually after six weeks. You can buy them from some branches of Boots, the high street chemist.
- **Waterproof and water-resistant hearing aids** are hearing aids that have a thin membrane to stop water – but not sound – getting into the aid. Waterproof aids are suitable for swimming and water-resistant ones for other watersports.

Digital hearing aids

Digital hearing aids look just like modern analogue hearing aids but they are different in that they process sound digitally. Sound is converted into bits of data or numbers that can be manipulated by a tiny computer inside the aid. This makes it possible to process and customise sounds very precisely to suit your hearing loss and you can then listen to sound comfortably, whatever the pattern of your hearing loss. Many digital aids can be programmed with different settings for different sound environments that you can select at a touch of a button. Some adjust themselves automatically.

One of the biggest problems for people with hearing aids is following what someone is 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 makes listening more comfortable, though it does not necessarily help you pick out one voice when many people are talking.

Want to know more?

This leaflet is available in audio tape, braille and large print.

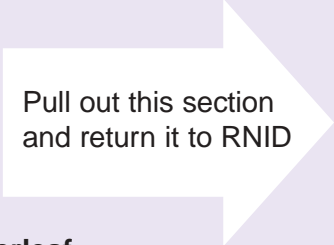
We can also send you more information on many of the subjects covered in this leaflet. Just tick the boxes below, tell us what you particularly need to know about, or see our website at www.rnid.org.uk



Please send me:

All about hearing aids –

- Audio tape Braille Large print
 - The RNID Publications Catalogue.
 - Information about RNID Typetalk and BT TextDirect.
 - Details of RNID communication services in my area.
 - A copy of the RNID Sound Advantage *Solutions* catalogue, giving details of equipment for deaf and hard of hearing people.
 - RNID's fundraising leaflet. RNID relies heavily on donations from individuals, companies, trusts and fundraising events. Our leaflet shows how *you* can help.
 - Information on how to take part in RNID campaigns.
 - Other information – please tell us what you would like to know.
- (PLEASE WRITE CLEARLY, USING BLOCK CAPITALS)



Please fill in your name and address details overleaf.

Please send this information to:

(PLEASE WRITE CLEARLY, USING BLOCK CAPITALS)

Title (Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss) _____ First name _____

Surname _____

Address _____

Postcode _____ E-mail _____

Telephone _____ Textphone _____

Your contact details will be held on our database so that occasionally we can send you information on our work. Please tick this box if you do not wish your details to be kept on our database.

We will use any information you give below to help us tailor our services to your needs. You do not have to give this information, but if you do, please tick this box to confirm we may keep it on our database.

Tick all boxes that apply

Is the information:

- For you
- For a friend or family member
- A professional enquiry

How would you describe yourself?

- Profoundly/severely deaf
- Hard of hearing
- Hearing
- Hearing aid user
- I have tinnitus
- I have balance problems

Are you?

- At school or below school age
- A student Working age
- Retired

If we could provide it, would you like to receive information in a different format? Please use number 1, 2, 3 or 4 to show your preferred choice:

- Printed information in British Sign Language (BSL) word order
- Videotape in BSL and with subtitles
- E-mail
- Face-to-face

If we could provide it, would you like information in another language?

- Yes. Please tell us which one _____

Please return to: RNID Information Line, 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL or order from our website at www.rnid.org.uk

Stay informed

The information and advice you have received in this leaflet does not stop here!

By joining RNID you will receive our bi-monthly lifestyle magazine **One in Seven**, so you need never miss out on all the latest news, views and products related to deafness and hearing loss.

But that's not all! RNID members also receive:

- A **Welcome Pack** detailing RNID services and publications.
- **10% discount** on all RNID priced publications.
- A **£5 voucher** when you join that you can use if you spend more than £50 on equipment from RNID Sound Advantage.
- In-depth **supplements** such as *Inspirations*.

How to join

By **post** using the form overleaf.

By **telephone** or **textphone**
on 020 7296 8049.

Online at www.rnid.org.uk

Join today!

Fill in the form overleaf to benefit.



Yes, I want to stay informed by becoming a member!

Title (Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss) _____ First name _____

(PLEASE USE BLOCK CAPITALS)

Surname _____

Address _____

Postcode _____ E-mail _____

Telephone _____ Textphone _____

Please accept my payment: (*tick relevant boxes*)

£17.99 Standard rate

£10.99 If you are retired, unwaged or a full-time student

I would like to make a donation of £ _____

I enclose a cheque/PO made payable to RNID (*delete as appropriate*)

I prefer to pay by MasterCard/Visa/CharityCard/Switch/Delta
(*delete as appropriate*)

Card number

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Switch issue no

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Signature _____ Expiry date _____

Please treat all my membership payments and/or donations from 6 April 2000 until further notice as Gift Aid. (This will increase the value of your membership fee to RNID by almost a third, with no extra cost to you.)

NB To qualify for Gift Aid, I understand that I must have paid an amount of Income Tax or Capital Gains Tax equal to the tax RNID reclaims on my donations and/or membership payments.

Please return this form to RNID, FREEPOST LON13186, London EC1B 1AL

Occasionally RNID will send you information on our work, please tick this box if you would prefer not to receive this. Occasionally we will allow other organisations to contact you, please tick this box if you would prefer not to be contacted.

Directional microphones have made a big difference to this problem. These are very sensitive to sounds directly in front of you and help you to focus on what you want to listen to. When coupled with digital processing, they enable you to listen as well as a hearing person in similar conditions. Some digital hearing aids are also designed to whistle or squeak less than analogue aids (see later, *When something goes wrong*).



Getting a digital hearing aid

Until recently you couldn't get digital hearing aids on the NHS. However, after intensive lobbying from RNID, the Government has provided funding to introduce digital hearing aids, starting with selected hospitals in England.

The Scottish and Welsh Executives have also provided funding for modernising audiology services throughout Scotland and Wales. This includes the provision of modern (but not always digital) hearing aids. RNID is actively lobbying for the modernisation of audiology services in Northern Ireland.

It is hoped that, eventually, digital hearing aids will be provided on the NHS throughout the UK.

Digital hearing aids are also available from a private hearing aid dispenser and cost up to £2,500 each.

Digital hearing aids look like modern analogue aids but they process sound digitally



Try and get used to the controls on your hearing aid from the start

How to use your hearing aid

Once you get your hearing aid, it is important to practise putting it in your ear and using the various controls on it. This will help you get used to using it and get the most from it. First, check that the earmould fits snugly but comfortably.

Controls on your hearing aid

Most hearing aids have a switch with different positions and a volume control wheel. Feel for the switch with your finger, switch your hearing aid on and off and adjust the volume to a comfortable level. Do this until you are used to the feel of your hearing aid. If you get used to changing the volume control right from the start, it will make it easier for you to adjust it when you need to, for example when you are with other people or if you go from a noisy environment into a quiet one.

Switch controls differ from one hearing aid to another. The most common ones are 'O' for 'off', 'M' for 'microphone' and a setting marked 'T'.

Have a look at the switch on your hearing aid. Normally, you use your hearing aid on the 'M' setting, and switch it to 'O' when you take it off. Very small hearing aids may not have an 'O' switch. To switch the aid off, you will need to open the battery door slightly.

The 'T' position

Most hearing aids have a setting marked 'T'. When the switch is on the 'T' position, your hearing aid will be able to pick up sound from listening equipment (see later, *Listening equipment*). This equipment transfers sound direct to your hearing aid, cutting out background noise. When you get your hearing aid, ask if it has a 'T' setting. If it is a very small aid, there may be no room. This means that you won't be able to use listening equipment with your hearing aid.

Batteries

You will have to change the batteries in your hearing aid regularly. If you have an NHS hearing aid, you can get free batteries from any hospital audiology or ENT department that has a battery service. You can buy batteries from any pharmacy.



The 'T' position is important for picking up sound from listening equipment



It takes time to get used to a hearing aid but it is worth persevering

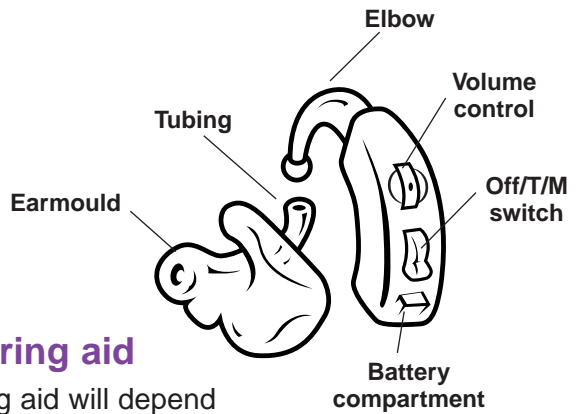
Getting used to your hearing aid

Getting used to your hearing aid can take several months. Start by wearing it 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 the light as it will make it 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 aid inside, try wearing it outside. To start, be careful not to have the volume too high when you go out because sounds, such as traffic, can be loud.

Finally, try using your hearing aid somewhere where it is noisy such as a restaurant or pub. This is likely to be the most difficult situation. You will probably not be able to hear everything that people say to you, but with time this should get easier.

If you still can't get used to your hearing aid, talk to your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser.



Looking after your hearing aid

How you look after your hearing aid will depend on the type of hearing aid you have. You should have been given written information telling you how to look after it.

Caring for your hearing aid mostly involves wiping clean or washing different parts as follows.

If you are not sure about any of the information given here, ask your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser for advice.

Behind-the-ear (BTE) hearing aids

Wipe the hearing aid and earmould with a dry tissue every time you take your hearing aid off. Ideally, you should wash the *earmould only* every night. If you can't do this, wash the earmould at least once a week. *Do not wash the hearing aid – the part that contains the battery.*

Don't unscrew the elbow from the hearing aid (see diagram). Instead, gently pull the plastic tubing off the elbow but not from the mould. Wash the earmould and tubing in warm soapy water, and rinse them. Blow down the tubing to get the water out, and let it dry overnight.

A behind-the-ear hearing aid

Once it is dry, push the end of the tubing back on to the elbow. You will need to change the tubing in a BTE hearing aid when it begins to harden. Ask your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser to show you how and give you spare tubing. If the tubing gets very hard, the hearing aid may not work well. If it splits, the aid will start to whistle (see later). If you find changing the tubing difficult, your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser can do this for you.

In-the-ear (ITE) hearing aids

There are two types of ITE hearing aids:

Custom ITE aids consist of only one piece. If you bought an ITE hearing aid privately, it is likely to be a custom one. You *must not* wash these. Wipe them with a dry tissue and use a soft dry brush to remove wax from the opening. Do not poke anything into the opening as you may damage the earphone. These aids often come with instructions and cleaning tools to help you.

Modular ITE aids consist of an earmould attached to a hearing aid. You can separate the earmould from the hearing aid and then wash the earmould in soapy water. Wipe the hearing aid part with a dry tissue instead. *Don't ever* wash it or get it wet.

In-the-canal (ITC) and completely-in-the-canal (CIC) hearing aids

You must not wash these hearing aids. Wipe them with a dry tissue and use a soft brush to clean wax from the opening. ITC hearing aids often come with special instructions and cleaning tools.

Body-worn (BW) hearing aids

If you have a BW hearing aid, wipe it all over with a dry cloth every time you take it out. Wash the *earmould only* at least once a week. Gently pull the receiver off the earmould. Put the hearing aid (the part with the battery in), lead and receiver in a safe, dry place. *Don't ever* get these wet.

Wash the earmould with warm soapy water, using a soft brush to remove any wax blocking the opening in the earmould. Rinse and dry the earmould carefully. Leave it to dry overnight before you clip it back on to the receiver.

The lead linking the receiver and hearing aid on BW hearing aids needs to be replaced from time to time.

Earmoulds

Ask your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser to make a new earmould if it wears out.



A loop system has been fitted where you see this sign

Listening equipment

Some equipment is especially designed to be used with hearing aids.

Loop systems are often installed in places such as theatres, public halls, post offices and banks. A sign like the one opposite means a loop has been installed. Find out if the loop is switched on and that it works. Loop systems can also be installed in your home to help you listen to your television and stereo system.

Telephones described as ‘hearing aid compatible’ have a kind of built-in loop. When you use this kind of telephone with your hearing aid in the ‘T’ position, the sound you hear will be clearer and without background noise. Practise holding the telephone earpiece in slightly different positions next to your hearing aid to get the best sound.

Some **listening aids** or **sound amplifiers** – used to hear television, music or conversations – can be used with or without your hearing aid.

For further information about listening equipment, see RNID’s leaflets, *Sound and subtitles – making the most of audiovisual equipment* and *Equipment for deaf people*.

When something goes wrong

If you are having problems with your hearing aid, your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser should be able to help you. However, there are some common problems that you may be able to sort out yourself. Try the suggestions below. If they don't help, then ask your audiologist or your hearing aid dispenser.

If your hearing aid doesn't seem to be working

- Check that you have not switched it to the 'T' position by accident.
- Make sure that the volume is at the correct level for you and not turned right down.
- Try putting a new battery in.
- If you have a BTE hearing aid, take it out, pull the tubing off the elbow and blow down the tubing to remove any condensation that may have collected and be blocking the tubing.

Whistling or squeaking is caused by ‘feedback’. This happens when sound amplified by your hearing aid is fed back into it. It may happen if:

- You have not put the earmould in properly – push it gently to check.
- You have excess wax in your ears – ask your GP to check your ears.
- The earmould does not fit your ear closely enough. Put a little Vaseline on the mould to see if this helps by sealing the hearing aid in your ear. Be careful not to block the opening in the earmould as this will stop sound coming through.
- You have the volume too high.
- If you have a BTE hearing aid, check the earmould, the elbow and the tubing. A crack in any of these will make your hearing aid whistle.

Buzzing noises may mean that you have switched your hearing aid to the ‘T’ position by accident. However, if this is not the problem, buzzing generally means your hearing aid has developed a fault and needs to be repaired.

What is RNID?

RNID is the largest charity representing the 8.7 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK. As a membership charity, we aim to achieve a radically better quality of life for deaf and hard of hearing people. We do this in the following ways:

- Campaigning and lobbying to change laws and government policies.
- Providing information and raising awareness of deafness, hearing loss and tinnitus.
- Training courses and consultancy on deafness and disability.
- Communication services including sign language interpreters.
- Training of interpreters, lipspeakers and speech-to-text operators.
- Seeking lasting change in education for deaf children and young people.
- Employment programmes to help deaf people into work.
- Residential and community services for deaf people with special needs.
- RNID Typetalk, the national telephone relay service for deaf and hard of hearing people.
- Equipment and products for deaf and hard of hearing people.
- Social, medical and technical research.

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This leaflet is part of RNID's **hearing aids** range.

Cover photograph by Chris Kelly.

Some photographs in this leaflet were posed by models.

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for deaf and hard of hearing people