What do hearing aids do?

Hearing aids are designed to amplify sounds so that they are loud enough, but not uncomfortably loud. The amplification volume depends on the type and degree of hearing loss you have. Hearing aids amplify all sounds, but are particularly designed to cope with the sounds that make up speech.

Sounds are made up of different pitches or 'frequencies'. Hearing aids amplify each pitch by different amounts, because when you have a hearing loss, you usually hear some frequencies more easily than others. Older people usually find the highest frequencies the hardest to hear - such as birds singing or a high pitched doorbell.

There are many different models of hearing aid, catering for all types of hearing loss. Hearing aids are available either through the National Health Service (NHS), or privately from a hearing aid dispenser.

Types of hearing aids

There are a number of different types of hearing aids to choose from, although not all will necessarily be suitable for you.

**Behind-the-ear aids (BTE)**

These types of aids are worn with an earmould made especially for you, which not only feed sounds through into your ear but also keep the hearing aid in place, over or behind your ear. There are models of BTE hearing aids to suit nearly all types and degrees of hearing loss. They are available both through the NHS and privately.

**In-the-ear aids**

Some people prefer these types of aids since they fit right into your ear, rather than behind it. These aids may be individually moulded to fit your own ear or may be modular - where a standard hearing aid is clipped to a custom-made hearing mould.

The smaller style, which fits right inside your ear canal, is not usually suitable if you are severely deaf.

**Body-worn aids**

Although these type of aids are still available both through the NHS and privately, they are less commonly used than the behind-the-ear and in-the-ear aids. They consist of a box about the size of a matchbox, which you clip to your belt or pocket, with a lead connecting it to an earphone and earmould. They are more cumbersome and less discreet than other types of aids but, because of their size, have large switches that are easier to operate and they may provide higher levels of amplification.

**Digital hearing aids**

Digital hearing aids use more advanced technology than the older analogue aids. They can be more precisely set up to suit your individual pattern of hearing loss. They also process sounds to suit various listening situations - many adjust automatically. They are better at filtering out background noise. They may be behind-the-ear or in-the-ear aids. They are available both through the NHS and privately.
How much help will I get from hearing aids?

Hearing aids will not restore your hearing to normal, or 'cure' your deafness. They are simply an 'aid to hearing'. When you use a hearing aid for the first time, everyday sounds may seem quite loud. It could take you a couple of months to get used to hearing sounds with your hearing aid. If you have any problems during this initial period, you should always return to the person who supplied you with the aid, for further advice.

You will probably find that your hearing aid is more helpful in some circumstances than others. You will need to experiment. Hearing aids are most useful in quiet surroundings, when you are talking to only one or two people at a time. Background noise, such as music or other people talking, may interfere with what you are trying to hear.

However, public places such as theatres and stations often have 'loop' systems fitted. Loop systems can help you to hear what is being said on stage, or spoken into the counter microphone through your hearing aid, without picking up unwanted background noise. A special sign lets you know when a loop system is installed. All public phones are also fitted with a tiny loop.

You can only use a loop if you are able to switch your hearing aid to a special 'T' setting. Almost all NHS aids have this setting, but some aids bought privately do not. Remember to check this if you are buying an aid.

How to get hearing aids

There are two ways of obtaining hearing aids. You can get hearing aids free on long term loan as an NHS patient or buy one from a private hearing aid dispenser. You may find it helpful to read through all the information below before deciding which route to take.

Digital hearing aids are now fitted routinely on the NHS across the UK and are usually the behind-the-ear type.

RNID produce useful factsheets on digital hearing aids and the NHS hearing aid service. Although the current NHS range of products can cater for most types of hearing loss, many more models are available privately. In special circumstances, your consultant may prescribe a hearing aid for you which is not normally available on the NHS.

Obtaining NHS hearing aids

It is a good idea to make a special visit to your GP to discuss your concerns about your hearing, rather than raising it at the end of a consultation about some other health problem, which your doctor may see as more important. After all, your hearing is very valuable to you!

Ask your GP to refer you to an ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist or hearing aid clinic. Arrangements differ slightly from one area to another, and waiting times also vary. Most GPs will be happy to refer you, once they have examined your ears and checked that they can't offer treatment. If you are over 60 your GP may be able to refer you straight to an audiology or hearing aid clinic without seeing an ENT specialist.
If your GP is reluctant to refer you, remind her/him of the effects hearing loss is having on your life. Explain that you should at least have the chance to find out if there is a problem and what can be done to help you.

At the hospital or health centre, your ears will be examined and your hearing will be tested by an audiologist. If the tests suggest that a hearing aid or aids may help you, an impression of your ear will be taken so that an earmould can be made.

Once the earmould is ready you will be fitted with the hearing aid. The hearing aid, batteries, repairs and servicing will all be provided free of charge. If it is decided that you will benefit from two hearing aids, the NHS should provide both free of charge. Contact the hearing aid department if you have any problems using your aid. They may be able to adjust it, change it for a different model or advise you about getting used to it.

Even if you buy an aid privately you still have the right to an NHS one. Most people find NHS aids very helpful and it is often a good idea to try a free NHS aid and see if it suits you, before thinking about buying one. Some hospitals have private hearing aid dispensers selling aids in the hospital, as well as the free NHS service.

**Buying hearing aids**

Hearing aids are sold to the public by hearing aid dispensers, not by the manufacturers. Although you do not need to be referred to a dispenser by your GP, it is a good idea to see your GP first, as dispensers are not likely to be medically trained. If you see your GP first, then any medical problem with your ears may be picked up.

All hearing aid dispensers must be registered with the Health Professions Council (HPC) and meet the HPC’s ‘fitness to practice’ standards. However, services do vary, so you need to be careful with your choice of dispenser. If you have any problems with an aid you have purchased privately, talk to the dispenser first. If you are still unhappy you might want to contact the Health Professions Council about your concerns.

If you decide to buy an aid, the following points may be of help:

- Use a dispenser who has been recommended by a friend.
- Go to a local dispenser.
- Take a friend or relative who has good hearing with you.
- Book an appointment with a dispenser in advance - don't buy hearing aids at an exhibition, or on the 'spur of the moment'.
- Make sure that you get a money back guarantee with enough time (at least 28 days) to try the aids and decide whether you want to keep them. You need to use them in a variety of situations to see whether they really help you. Each hearing aid will cost between will cost between £600 and £3,500, so you need to be sure that what you buy is right for you.
- Do read any document you are asked to sign carefully. By signing an agreement to buy an aid, you are entering into a legal contract. If you are unsure about anything in the contract, don't sign! RNID’s factsheet: Buying hearing aids gives more information gives more information on this. See contacts for details.

**Choosing hearing aids**
Most people need some guidance when getting hearing aids. RNID publishes two factsheets Digital hearing aids and NHS hearing aid service which answers some of the most common queries.

Here are a few points that you may wish to think about when deciding what sort of hearing aids you might want.

You may wonder whether to buy an aid or get one through the NHS. Many people choose to get their first aid through the NHS, especially if they are happy to use a behind-the-ear aid, the usual type supplied.

- Remember that there is a range of NHS aids. If the first aid you are fitted with is not quite as helpful as you’d hoped, you should return to the hearing aid department. The staff may be able to adjust your aid or change it for a different model.
- Remember that in-the-ear hearing aids can be fiddly to adjust, because of the very small controls. If you have arthritis in your fingers, or poor sight, this could be a problem for you. On the other hand, in-the-ear aids are usually easy to insert in your ear.
- Be aware that the claims made in some hearing aid advertisements can be misleading. Be especially cautious about claims that a particular hearing aid will cure the problems of unwanted background noise. This still remains the major problem for hearing aid manufacturers and users, although some hearing aids have special features to help with this.
- If you decide to buy an aid, you can expect it to last around five to seven years. But, of course, if your hearing gets worse, you may need to replace the aid with a more powerful model, which you will have to buy. You will also have to pay for batteries and repairs.
- Many people benefit from a hearing aid in each ear. If you need them you should be able to get them on the NHS.
- Remember that owning a private hearing aid does not affect your right to a NHS aid.

Other helpful equipment

Some people with a hearing loss use special equipment as well as their hearing aids. Special equipment can help you to hear particular sounds around the home, like the telephone and doorbell, and make it possible to hear the television or radio without the volume turned up very high.

Television and radio

Specially designed equipment is available for amplifying the sound from your television and radio, or you could use a home loop system together with your hearing aid.

Telephones

Some telephones have an amplifier in the handset, so you can turn up the volume to hear the other person better. Some are fitted with an ‘inductive coupler’, a small loop
which can be used by hearing aid users who have a ‘T’ switch on their aid. RNID has a helpful factsheet Telephones and voice communications that also tells you about using the internet to make phone calls.

Doorbells

If you have difficulty hearing your doorbell, there is equipment that will make your doorbell louder or replace it with vibrating pads and flashing lights which will let you know somebody is at your door.

Where to get special equipment

This type of equipment is often available on free loan through your local social services department. Ask to speak to the social worker for deaf people. If you prefer to buy equipment yourself, RNID has a range of factsheets to help you.

Lipreading

Lipreading is a skill which most people use unconsciously to some degree. We usually focus on another person's face and lips if we are having difficulty hearing what they are saying (often because of intrusive background noise). We do this in an attempt to search for visual clues as to what the speaker is saying.

If you have a hearing loss, lipreading can be a very useful aid to hearing. Going to a local lipreading class may improve your skills, and your confidence. Find out about local classes through your library, RNID or Hearing Concern.

RNID
19-23 Featherstone Street
London EC1Y 8SL
Tel: 0808 808 0123 (free call)
Text: 0808 808 9000 (free call)
Fax: 020 7296 8199
Email informationline@rnid.org.uk

RNID is the largest charity representing the 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK. As a membership charity, it aims to achieve a radically better quality of life for deaf and hard of hearing people. They do this by campaigning and lobbying vigorously, by raising awareness of deafness and hearing loss, by providing services and through social, medical and technical research.

Hearing Link
27-28 The Waterfront
Eastbourne
East Sussex
BN23 5UZ
Tel/text: 0300 11101113 Fax: 01323 471260 SMS: 07526 123255

Hearing Link is a national organisation that offers help and support to people who have lost most or all of their hearing. It offers training courses and has Outreach Volunteers
and Hearing Advisers who provide support and practical advice to people who have lost their hearing. Hearing Advisers are usually people who have hearing loss themselves.

**Hearing Link Scotland**  
The Eric Liddell Centre  
15 Morningside Road  
Edinburgh  
EH10 4DP  
Voice/text: 0131 447 9420

**Health Professions Council**  
[Health Professions Council website](#)  
Complaints helpline: 0800 328 4218

The Health Professions Council is responsible for the regulation of hearing aid dispensers and for handling complaints about their fitness to practice.