



Hearing Aids

Types of hearing aid

Behind the ear (BTE) hearing aids

These have an ear mould which sits inside your ear. The hearing aid rests behind your ear and a plastic tube connects it to the ear mould. These are the most common types, and most people with NHS hearing aids have one of these.

BTE hearing aids with “open ear fitting” have a small soft earpiece instead of the ear mould. They are only suitable for mild or moderate hearing loss.

Receiver-in-the-ear (RITE) or loudspeaker-in-the-ear BTEs

These have a clear tube with a wire inside which runs from the BTE to a loudspeaker held in the ear by a soft earpiece. They are not currently available on the NHS.

In-the-ear (ITE) and in-the-canal (ITC) hearing aids

The whole aid fits in your ear as the working parts are in the ear mould. Some in-the-ear aids can be seen from the side, but small in-the-canal aids can't be seen at all. However, if your hearing loss is severe, these may not be the best aids for you.

Body worn hearing aids

This has a small box that you clip on to your clothes or keep in your pocket. It contains a microphone, and is connected by a lead to an earphone clipped into your ear mould. These may be suitable if you have sight problems, or struggle with small switches or buttons.

Bone conduction hearing aids

These are for people with conductive hearing loss, or people who can't wear a conventional hearing aid. They deliver sound through the skull by vibrations. They can be fitted to a special headband or built into spectacles.

CROS/BiCROS hearing aids

These are for people with hearing in one ear only. CROS hearing aids pick up sounds on the side with no hearing, and feed it to the better side, and BiCros hearing aids amplify the sound on both sides and feed it to the side with hearing. There are now wireless versions available.

Disposable hearing aids

These are only suitable for people with mild to moderate hearing loss. They fit right inside the ear canal, and can be thrown away when the battery runs out (usually about 10 weeks). They are only available through private dispensers.

Waterproof and water-resistant hearing aids

Waterproof aids are suitable for swimming and water resistant aids can be used for other water sports.

How do they work?

“Hearing aids have a built-in microphone which 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, made louder and tailored to suit your hearing needs.” (RNID)

Background noise

Digital aids are designed to reduce steady kinds of background noise, such as traffic, although this doesn't necessarily mean you will be able to pick out a single voice from everything else that's going on. Wearing hearing aids in both ears, or using hearing aids that have twin microphones, have been shown to improved hearing in noisy situations.

Whistling

Digital hearing aids have the ability to reduce the whistling that bothers many people who use hearing aids.

Comfortable Listening

Digital hearing aids can be programmed to suit your particular hearing loss, and so ensure that sounds are heard at a level that is comfortable to you. They are often completely self-adjusting. They may require some regular fine tuning.

The 'T' Setting

It is usually possible to switch to 'T' with a digital hearing aid. This will allow you to pick up sound from a loop system or inductive coupler. However, if you choose a small hearing aid (that fits into the ear canal) there might not be room for the necessary telecoil, so the 'T' setting will not be available.

The NHS Hearing Aid Service

The NHS buys a range of hearing aids and uses its bulk buying power to get good quality digital hearing aids at low prices from hearing aid manufacturers. The audiology departments provide these aids free of charge on long-term loan to NHS patients. Hearing aids provided by the NHS usually fit behind the ear.

If you think you are having hearing difficulties, the first thing you need to do is visit your GP. Wax may have built up or you may have an infection that has temporarily affected your hearing. These can be easily treated. Your GP may refer you to a hospital ear, nose and throat (ENT) clinic, where you will see an ENT surgeon and an audiologist.

Otherwise, your GP may send you straight to the audiology department at a local hospital or centre to have your hearing tested. In most areas, you'll only get a direct referral if you are over 60. If you are younger, the cause of your hearing loss is more likely to require attention from an ENT doctor.

Buying Privately

The NHS and the private sector are completely separate. Although the hearing aids come from the same manufacturers, you can't get financial help from the NHS to buy hearing aids privately. However, if you do buy them privately, you are still entitled to NHS hearing aids.

They can be bought from high street dispensers, but the cost is very high – up to £3000 for each aid. Before you buy, it is important to check what will happen if you need more help, or if your hearing aid breaks down.

For further information

The Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) has factsheets and leaflets with useful information.

RNID

Address: 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL

Email: informationline@rnid.org.uk

Telephone Information Line: 0808 808 0123

Textphone: 0808 808 9000

SMS: 0780 0000 360

Website: www.rnid.org.uk

Richmond Council Sensory Services also provide information, including factsheets on hearing aids.

Telephone: 020 8487 1760

Minicom: 020 8487 1762

Text: 07903 738043

Fax: 020 8487 1761

Email: senservteam@richmond.gov.uk

Website: www.richmond.gov.uk

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