

BUYING A HEARING AID?

Introduction

This factsheet is part of RNID's **hearing aids** range. It is aimed at people who need a hearing aid.

In the UK, you can buy a hearing aid from a private hearing aid dispenser or you can get them free on the NHS. This factsheet tells you what you need to consider if you are thinking about buying your hearing aid privately. To find out more about getting a hearing aid on the NHS, see RNID's factsheet, *The NHS Hearing Aid Service*, and ask your GP (family doctor) to refer you.

Why go private?

Some people choose to buy a hearing aid rather than get a free NHS one. Their reasons are often to do with speed, more choice and convenience:

- If you buy a hearing aid, you can usually get it within two weeks. Getting NHS hearing aids can take months in some areas.
- The NHS has a standard range of hearing aids. You may prefer a hearing aid that is not available as part of their range. For example, you may want a very small model that fits completely in your ear canal.

- You can get private hearing aids from a hearing aid dispenser on the high street. You may prefer the convenience of the high street rather than having to go to a hospital for your NHS hearing aid.

Hearing aids cannot restore perfect hearing in the way that spectacles can restore perfect sight. They make sound louder so that you can hear it, but will not necessarily make everything clear. Hearing aids are of great benefit to many people, but any hearing aid dispenser or company that promises to give you perfect hearing is raising unrealistic expectations.

Finding a hearing aid dispenser

The Hearing Aid Council (HAC) was set up in 1968 by Act of Parliament to regulate the conduct of hearing aid dispensers. By law, all hearing aid dispensers, whether fully qualified or in training, must be registered with the HAC and follow its code of practice (see later). HAC regulations also state that a hearing aid should be sold to you only by a qualified dispenser or by a trainee who is being supervised by a qualified dispenser.

Qualified hearing aid dispensers have the letters 'RHAD' after their name. RHAD stands for 'Registered Hearing Aid Dispenser'. Full members of the British Society of Hearing Aid Audiologists (BSHAA) use the letters 'MSHAA' and Fellows of the Society, who have passed a further examination, may use the letters 'FSHAA'. However, it is not compulsory for hearing aid dispensers to join the BSHAA. Some dispensers, who are members of the Royal Society of Health, use the letters MRSH in addition to the letters RHAD.

Some NHS hospitals now allow private dispensers to sell hearing aids from within the hospital, though they must be registered with the HAC.

Code of practice

The HAC's code of practice says that the dispenser must advise you to see a doctor, if you have not already done so, for example, if:

- You have been exposed to loud noise;
- You suddenly became deaf, your deafness suddenly got worse or your hearing seems to vary;
- Your hearing is much worse on one side than on the other;
- You have medical problems such as excessive wax or a discharge in your ears, giddiness, tinnitus, signs of injury or disease in your ear.

A copy of the HAC's code of practice must be given to you if you ask for it.

The HAC cannot recommend either individual dispensers or particular hearing aids. This means you need to pick your dispenser carefully. If you think you have hearing loss, it is a good idea to see your GP first anyway. He or she will check your ears to see if you need medical investigation or treatment. If you have already decided to buy a hearing aid tell your GP as they may be able to tell you about hearing aid dispensers in your area. Alternatively, if someone you know has bought a hearing aid from a local dispenser, ask them if they would recommend that dispenser. Do remember that the type of hearing aid they have may not necessarily be suitable for you.

A dispenser usually has premises on a high street. Many are willing to see you in your own home. However, you may prefer to visit the dispenser so that you can leave when you want, rather than inviting one to visit you in your home.

No dispenser or employer of dispensers may visit you at home unless you have asked for a visit. If a dispenser contacts you to suggest a visit, he or she must send you written notice before the visit, so you can cancel the appointment if you choose to. You may want to arrange to have someone with you for support when the dispenser visits.

If you are thinking of buying from a dispenser who is visiting your area, check that the dispenser will be in the area regularly and that you can contact them easily. You will need to be able to see them if you have a problem with your hearing aid and need to get it adjusted. If in doubt, contact the HAC and find out where the dispenser is based, or use a local dispenser instead.

What happens when the hearing aid dispenser sees you?

The hearing aid dispenser will first test your hearing. The range of tests carried out varies, but they must include:

- An “air conduction” hearing test. In this test you listen to tones (beeps) through headphones and tell the dispenser which you can hear.
- A “bone conduction” hearing test. In this test you will be asked to wear a special headband that conducts sound through the bones of your skull. When the results are compared with what you heard through headphones in the above test, they show whether you have a problem with your eardrum or middle ear.

The results will be presented to you as an ‘audiogram’, which is a graph showing how well you hear low, middle and high tones.

A typical charge for private hearing tests is about £25. Some dispensers do not charge for tests. However, you may not be given a copy of your audiogram if the test is free. It is useful to have a copy so you can shop around and compare prices for hearing aids from other hearing aid dispensers.

Once you have had your hearing tested, the dispenser will discuss with you which kind of hearing aid will be best for you. Many people benefit from wearing a hearing aid in each ear, rather than just one. However, remember that this will mean paying out almost twice as much.

The dispenser will then take an impression of your ear, and send it to a laboratory for the earmould – or the casing, if it is a hearing aid that goes all in the ear – to be made. When this is ready, the dispenser will adjust or program the hearing aid to suit your hearing loss and explain how to use it. He or she will advise you to wear your hearing aid for about an hour in a quiet place to begin with such as indoors, and to build up the length of time you use it gradually, in various situations. The last stage in this process is wearing your aid outside or somewhere noisy such as a pub.

The dispenser should arrange an after-care appointment about six weeks after fitting your hearing aid. This is important as the hearing aid may need adjustment or fine-tuning for you to get the best results from it.

How much will a hearing aid cost?

A private hearing aid costs between £300 and £2,500, depending on its style and technical sophistication. Make sure you are getting the hearing aid you want at a price you can afford. Medical insurance may cover its cost, but ask your insurer before you buy a hearing aid privately.

You may want to take a friend with you for moral support or if you are worried about mishearing something. Check if the price the dispenser quotes includes the cost of hearing tests, the dispenser's time, follow-up appointments, the earmould, tubing – if you need it – and batteries.

Hearing aids last five years or more, but you will have to pay when they need replacing. Smaller hearing aids may not last as long.

Get a guarantee

You will have to pay for repairs after the guarantee on the hearing aid runs out. The cost of these can mount up. Guarantee periods range between one and four years. Find out what the guarantee period is for the hearing aid you are being offered. You can usually insure your hearing aid against loss or damage through your house insurance, but you need to check this.

It takes a while to get used to a new hearing aid and you will need to try it out in various situations to be sure it is right for you. Dispensers should allow you a 28-day trial period or a money-back guarantee so that you can return the hearing aid if you are not happy with it. If the dispenser is not prepared to offer this and suggests a guarantee for repair only instead of giving you the option of a refund, go elsewhere. You are unlikely to get a full refund because the price you pay usually includes the hearing tests and fitting. **So it is very important to get a written note of the terms under which you can cancel buying your hearing aids.**

Caution - listening devices

Avoid advertisements offering 'listening devices' for as little as £10. Though they are cheap, they do not provide the benefits of a hearing aid chosen and adjusted to suit your particular needs. In addition, the HAC has authority only over companies selling 'hearing aids'. Companies that use the phrase 'listening devices' are therefore not bound by the HAC's code of practice.

Deciding which hearing aid to buy

You can buy from a range of hearing aids. Remember that the type of hearing aid someone else has will not necessarily suit you.

Digital hearing aids

Many modern hearing aids are 'digital', but not all digital aids are equally sophisticated. With the more advanced digital aids it is possible to tailor sound very precisely to suit you. They also stop feedback – whistling – automatically and reduce background noise so that listening is more comfortable. Some also have directional microphones that make it easier for you to hear in noisy places. However, sophisticated digital hearing aids are currently much more expensive than analogue aids. If you are thinking of buying one, remember that no hearing aid can give you perfect hearing. Do not be pressured into buying an expensive digital hearing aid

unless you can try it first in everyday situations to make sure it is easy to use and that it really helps you.

Disposable hearing aids

Some branches of the high street chemist 'Boots' now dispense disposable hearing aids, which you throw away when the battery runs out, usually after six weeks. These fit entirely in the ear, but they may not be comfortable for everyone. Although they have different kinds of amplification for different hearing needs and good sound quality, they are suitable only for people with mild to moderate hearing loss. If you are wondering whether a hearing aid may help you, you may wish to try disposable ones first. The initial cost for disposable hearing aids is at least £85. This includes £25 for the hearing test and £60 for a three-month supply for one ear or £120 for the first three months if you want a hearing aid for each ear. After that, it is £22 for each ear every month.

What size hearing aid?

Both analogue and digital aids come in a range of styles, for example behind-the-ear, in-the-ear, or even smaller aids that fit completely in your ear canal. The very small styles, though less noticeable, may have some disadvantages. They tend to break down more often, you may not be able to use them with a loop and you may find them fiddly.

Hearing aids and loop systems

Not all private hearing aids – such as very small hearing aids – can be used with loop systems though many can be adapted on request. If using a loop is important to you, make sure that it is possible to do so with the model you are buying.

Buying abroad

The media has given a lot of coverage to buying hearing aids abroad at cheaper prices, particularly in Germany and Denmark.

RNID cannot recommend any particular hearing aid models, manufacturers or services and would advise you to think carefully before buying a hearing aid abroad.

The initial cost of a hearing aid may be less than in the UK, but you may need to see the dispenser for adjustments – sometimes several times – which could be expensive and inconvenient. It is important to check beforehand what will happen if you need more help or if your hearing aid breaks down once you are back home again.

If you have a problem

Most people are happy with the hearing aid they buy and with the service they get from their private hearing aid dispenser, but some people run into difficulties because:

- The aid does not match up to their own expectations.
- The aid does not match up to the dispenser's assurances.
- The dispenser pressurised them to buy a hearing aid.
- The aid gives repeated trouble – for example, it may whistle or be uncomfortable – and the dispenser cannot put this right.

If you have any problem at all with a hearing aid you have bought, the first thing you should do is ask the dispenser who sold it to you for help and advice. Make a note of the problems you experience over a period of a few days so that you can explain what is wrong and help the dispenser to sort it out.

If you are still unhappy with the aid, or feel the dispenser is not providing a good service, your next step is to write to the HAC (see *Contact details*). Describe the problems you have had with the hearing aid dispenser,

include copies of any correspondence or other documents connected with the hearing aid, and give the name and address of the dispenser or company that sold you the aid.

Although the HAC is not a watch-dog, its code of practice does protect you to a great extent. If the HAC Disciplinary Committee decides a dispenser has broken any of its regulations, it can fine the dispenser. In extreme cases, a dispenser may be struck off the register and will then be unable to continue to sell hearing aids.

If you are still not happy with the outcome of this, and feel the HAC has not addressed your concerns, it may be worth pursuing a claim through the small claims court. Your local citizen's advice bureau will be able to advise you about this.

Many people who develop a hearing loss find it isolating and frustrating, however a number of organisations, such as RNID, can offer you support and advice.

Ask your GP if you can see a hearing therapist at your local hospital. If you have an NHS hearing aid, you could contact the hospital audiology department direct to ask them if this is possible. Hearing therapists can give you a lot of advice on coming to terms with hearing loss.

Your social services department may be able to lend you equipment such as amplified telephones to use at home.

The RNID Information Line can tell you how to contact local clubs and organisations for hard of hearing people that can offer you support.

Contact details

Hearing Aid Council

Hearing Aid Council, Witan Court, 305 Upper Fourth Street,
Milton Keynes MK9 1EH.

Tel: 01908 235700. Fax: 01908 233770.

E-mail: hac@thehearingaidcouncil.org.uk

Website: www.thehearingaidcouncil.org.uk

Further information from RNID

If you want to find out more about some of the subjects covered in this factsheet, the following RNID factsheets may be useful – *Digital hearing aids*. You may also wish to get RNID's leaflets, *A user's guide to hearing aids*, *All about hearing aids*, *Common ear problems* and *Equipment for deaf people*.

The RNID Information Line offers a wide range of information on many aspects of deafness and hearing loss. You can contact us for further copies of this factsheet and the full range of RNID information factsheets and leaflets.

RNID Information Line

Website: www.rnid.org.uk E-mail: informationline@rnid.org.uk

Tel: 0808 808 0123; Textphone: 0808 808 9000; Fax: 020 7296 8199.

RNID Information Line, 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL.

Alternatively, fill in the *Want to know more?* order form at the end of this factsheet and return it to RNID.

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This factsheet is available in audio tape, braille and large print. We can also send you more information on many of the subjects covered in this factsheet. 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:

Buying a hearing aid? audio tape braille large print

The RNID Publications Catalogue.

Information about RNID Typetalk and BT TextDirect.

Details of RNID communication services in my area.

RNID's fundraising leaflet. RNID relies heavily on donations from individuals, companies, trusts and fundraising events. Our leaflet shows how *you* can help.

A copy of the RNID Sound Advantage *Solutions* catalogue, giving details of equipment for deaf and hard of hearing people.

Other information – please tell us what you would like to know.

(PLEASE WRITE CLEARLY, USING BLOCK CAPITALS)

RNID is always keen to hear what its customers think of its publications. If you have any suggestions for ways we could improve this factsheet you can use the space below. Please send your suggestions to the address 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 the database.

We will use any information you give below to monitor requests for this factsheet and 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

Are you?

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

How would you describe yourself?

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

If we could provide them, which of these formats would you like this factsheet available in?

- Videotape in sign language and with subtitles
- E-mail/website
- Face-to-face information
- Another language (not English; please say which)

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