

Hearing loss and aids

 Information for patients



PROUD TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

SHEFFIELD TEACHING HOSPITALS NHS FOUNDATION TRUST



How does the ear work?

The human ear is made of three different parts:

1. The outer ear,
2. middle ear and
3. inner ear.

The outer ear is the part that we can all see at the side of the head. It also contains the ear hole or passageway down to the eardrum. This is lined by skin and is where wax is made. If there is too much wax, a narrow passageway or infection of the skin, this can lead to a mechanical (conductive) hearing loss.

The middle ear consists of the ear drum and ear bones. These structures help transfer sound into the inner ear. They need to be intact and surrounded by air to work. If there is a problem with the drum or ear bones or there is infection in the middle ear this can also result in a mechanical (conductive) hearing loss.

If there is a problem with the inner ear, this can result in an electrical (sensorineural) hearing loss.

How do I know if I have hearing loss?

Unless you suddenly lose your hearing, this is usually a gradual process. Often it is family, friends or colleagues that notice the problem before you do.

In general, you begin to need the TV volume turned up, you may miss parts of conversation on the telephone and family / friends / colleagues start to shout or repeat themselves. This is more noticeable particularly if there is background noise. You may also find that sounds alter and certain pitches of noise may even be uncomfortable. Working out where noise is coming from may also be difficult.

I have been told that I have a conductive hearing loss; what is this?

If you have a problem with the outer or middle ear, this will result in a conductive or mechanical hearing loss. Your doctor will discuss various options available to help with this which may include: monitoring the situation, using a hearing aid, or a surgical procedure e.g. grommet, closing a hole in the ear drum, surgery on the ear bones or on the mastoid (bone just behind the ear).

I have been told that I have a sensorineural hearing loss; what is this?

This is when there is a weakness in the inner ear or the pathways that send information to the listening part of the brain. It is one of the most common hearing losses that we see in clinic and is commonly due to general age or wear and tear on the inner ear. Other causes include exposure to loud noise over prolonged periods or medications that could be poisonous to the inner ear. Your doctor will offer you advice or a hearing aid depending on the level of the hearing loss.

Hearing aids

There are various types of hearing aids available on the NHS. Typically they consist of a device that sits behind the ear and which delivers the improved sound to your ear through a small tube that sits in the ear hole.

What happens if I ignore my hearing loss?

The effects of hearing loss are gradual and can sometimes go unnoticed. There is increasing evidence to suggest that hearing loss leads to low mood, social isolation and possibly early loss of memory.

What should I expect from a hearing aid?

Experiences with hearing aids vary due to the degree and type of damage to the hearing mechanisms and the brain's ability to process sound information. It can take some time (weeks to months) for the brain to fully adjust to a hearing aid and it requires you to wear the hearing aid every day for at least 5 to 7 hours per day.

Having a hearing aid will improve your ability to hear conversation. However, even the smartest of these devices can struggle in the presence of background noise. Practice, patience and perseverance are key to having a successful experience with a hearing aid.

What will it sound like?

Hearing aids may sound echoey or tinny at first, and the sound of your own voice will be louder. In fact most people will ask if they are shouting when they first put the hearing aid in. The more the hearing aid is worn, the quicker the brain can adapt and retrain itself to the sound from the hearing aid. In time, the sound from the hearing aid will become more natural.

What will happen when I have been referred for a hearing aid?

When you are referred to the Hearing Services department for a digital behind the ear hearing aid you may be sent an appointment for an impression to be taken of your ear/s. This is so that an ear mould can be made which will attach to the hearing aid. Some digital behind the ear hearing aids do not require an ear mould but this depends on the degree and type of hearing loss you have.

When will I get the hearing aid?

After being referred for hearing aids, you will be seen by the audiologist. Depending on the type and level of your hearing loss, the audiologist might be able to fit you with the hearing aid at the first visit or may need to take an impression of your ear canal to create a bespoke mould (this can take a few weeks). You will get user instructions when you are fitted with the hearing aids.

What do I do if I have a problem with my hearing aid?

We have an open hearing aid repair service which runs from Monday to Friday between the hours of 8.45am and 11.45am. You can take a ticket at these times and wait to be seen. Alternatively you can arrange a specific appointment time.

What else might help?

Any degree of hearing loss can make communication difficult. You may be able to improve it by making a few changes.

- Reduce background noise whenever possible. Turn off the radio or TV if you are not specifically watching it. Avoid conversations in the kitchen especially when preparing food or drinks. Move away from sources of noise such as machinery or traffic.
- When watching TV, consider using subtitles. Remember that the quality of subtitles is much better for pre-recorded programmes than for live broadcasts like the news. You may want to try a TV listener or portable speaker to bring the sound of the TV to you. If you are going to be fitted with hearing aids there may be an accessory that will bring the TV sound to your hearing aids. Also check the sound settings on your television as there may be a setting which will make a slight improvement.

- You will notice that some environments are better for hearing than others. Generally soft furnishings, curtains and carpets make it easier to hear as they reduce the vibration of the sound. It helps to keep this in mind when choosing restaurants or cafés.
- When in noisy environments try to sit in a corner or with a wall behind you so that you do not have noise coming from all sides. Look for a seat away from the main counter or bar area and the doorway to the street. Try to avoid sitting near a music speaker.
- You may find yourself using some lip reading. It helps to sit with the source of light behind you so that the light will fall onto the face of the person you are talking to.
- If you have a better ear, position yourself so that the person you are talking to is on your good side.
- If you are out with a large group, sit at one end of the table so that you do not have speech coming from both sides. Read the menu carefully so you are prepared for all the questions you will be asked when giving your order.
- Try to be honest. Misunderstandings can cause confusion and embarrassment for both you and the person you are talking to. Ask them to speak a little slower and try to avoid looking away while they are talking. Warn them that you may lose some of their speech if you do not realise they have changed topic.
- Use visual information. When attending appointments read all the information you have been sent. When you arrive read notices on walls and doors. Ask for future appointments to be written on a card or letter. When making telephone calls ask for important details to be confirmed by email. At work, read agendas and

papers carefully before meetings and ask for handouts in advance for staff training.

- When making telephone calls try using your mobile with earphones as they will enable you to listen with both ears and cut out some of the background noise. On mobiles and landlines you may find the 'speakerphone' setting easier to hear although it reduces privacy. If you find voicemail messages difficult to hear on your mobile, change your answerphone message to ask the caller to send a text instead.

Additional information can be obtained from:

- **www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk**
(useful facts and equipment that can support someone living with hearing loss)
- **www.connevans.co.uk**
(equipment to help support someone with hearing loss)



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