



Self Help for Hard of Hearing People



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Information Sheets

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Information Sheet Number 4

GETTING THE BEST FROM YOUR HEARING AID

When those who have impaired hearing have acknowledged their hearing loss, had an assessment by professionally qualified people, and been fitted with correctly prescribed hearing aids, they can expect to improve their hearing function in most family and social situations.

You can be confident of success if you:

- Learn to manage your hearing aids effectively
- Supplement your hearing aids with appropriate assistive devices if necessary
- Adopt good listening tactics
- Have patience, perseverance, and practice!

UNDERSTANDING HOW WE HEAR SPEECH

While we are all aware of the importance of the volume of sound in our ability to hear, we are perhaps not so familiar with the effects of the frequency, or pitch, of

sound. Almost all the sounds we hear have components of different sound frequencies. If our ability to hear some of those frequencies is diminished, we may still hear the sound but it will seem to us to be muffled or distorted.

This applies particularly to the sounds of speech, where the vowels are low frequency sounds, while the consonants fall into the higher frequency range. Highest of all are the unvoiced sounds, such as 's', 'sh', and 'th'. If we have a high frequency hearing loss, we will not find it easy, for instance, to hear the difference between the words 'three' and 'free'. Many words will sound the same to us and we may accuse the speaker of mumbling. We may well hear 'six hungry people' as 'six hundred people'!

A hearing assessment will indicate your threshold for hearing (the quietest sounds you can hear) at different frequencies, and the pattern of your hearing loss will be plotted on a graph – an audiogram. You should also have a speech discrimination test. A qualified audiologist or audiometrist will use this information to determine whether you will benefit from using a hearing aid and, if so, to recommend an aid most suitable for you.

For some people, deterioration or damage to parts of the inner ear, or to the auditory pathway to the brain, means that they are unable to hear clearly, regardless of amplification – they may find it difficult to understand speech sounds even when wearing an aid.

THERE'S MORE TO HEARING AND UNDERSTANDING SPEECH THAN MAKING EVERYTHING LOUDER

GETTING USED TO USING YOUR HEARING AID

All hearing aids amplify sound and bring the amplified sound directly to your ear. But all hearing aids, even though they may look identical, are not the same.

If your hearing loss happened to be the same for all frequencies, the aid would be designed to amplify all sounds equally – rather like turning up the volume on a TV set. In most cases, however, hearing loss does not occur equally at all frequencies, so your aid will be prescribed just for you, to meet your special requirements. It will be programmed and adjusted to compensate for your specific hearing loss and will boost those frequencies where you need the most help.

Because your hearing may have deteriorated slowly, over many years, you may not have noticed the gradual loss of quality in the sounds you hear. For most people, an aid will give more distinct sounds, sharper than the muffled ones to which you have

become accustomed. Everyday sounds – your footsteps, the clock ticking, papers rustling, other people's voices, and especially your own voice, will sound different.

You should welcome this new clarity, just as you would welcome the sharper images which glasses produce for those with impaired vision. However, it takes time to become used to the change and you will have to allow yourself a period of adjustment.

STEP BY STEP

- Take time to learn the following basics – practise as often as possible:
 - Putting in your new aid and taking it out
 - Turning your aid on and off while it is in your ear
 - Getting used to the controls on your aid and those on the remote control (if you have one) and using them while the aid is in your ear.
- To begin with, do not wear your new aid for long periods – make sure you take the time to put it in and use it in different situations. Practise regularly.
- Try it for an hour at a time in a quiet situation at home – listen to the different sounds around your home, eg a clock ticking, the hum of the refrigerator, closing a door, a tap running, the toilet flushing, birds chirping and the sound of your own voice (read the newspaper out loud)
- Then try a conversation with one other person; position yourself so that you can see each other in a good light
- Take the aid out when you begin to feel tired and irritated from listening to amplified sounds or from soreness of your ear canal.
- Each time you put your aid in, try to wear it for a longer period.
- Next, try listening to TV news programs where the background noise is reduced. Listen to your radio. Try a conversation with two or three other people.
- Now begin wearing your hearing aid outside and gradually listen to passing traffic. Go to a shopping centre and other public places such as a cinema or church.
- If you travel in a car, sit in the front seat if possible so that conversation from the back seat and others in the front seat is directed at you.

If your hearing aid causes discomfort or if you feel that it does not significantly improve your ability to hear, you should go back to your hearing aid provider and explain your difficulties. The aid itself or the ear mould may need adjusting. It may take several visits to achieve the best results.

Do not just put your new aid in a drawer because it 'doesn't work properly.'
Only YOU can make it work to YOUR benefit. Remember it takes TIME and PATIENCE.

GOOD LISTENING TACTICS

If you are to continue to function well in a hearing world, you should make the most of the hearing you have with the help of your hearing aids and assistive devices. After an initial adjustment period, you should aim to wear your hearing aid all your waking hours.

In some situations you will gain immediate benefits. For hearing aid wearers, however, some listening conditions are more difficult. By being positive and adopting the following simple listening techniques, you will be able to take part in most social activities and use your aid comfortably and effectively.

Volume: It is most likely that your aid will be adjusted to amplify some frequencies more than others. Because of this, any major increase in volume will tend to cause an imbalance, and the sound you hear will be distorted. Increasing the volume will also amplify unwanted background noise – you will want to avoid this. As a general rule, it is not wise to vary the volume from the setting recommended by your qualified hearing professional. Note that this does not apply when using the telecoil. It is often necessary to increase the volume when switching to the T position.

In crowded and noisy social situations: You can never totally eliminate background noise, but to minimise it you may need to turn the volume down. Place yourself as far as possible from the sources of interference such as loudspeakers. If necessary, move to another place for conversation – into another room, the hallway, or into the garden. If you have an aid with a telecoil facility, you will be able to make good use of personal communication devices to supplement your aid in these more difficult listening environments. It is often necessary to increase the volume when switching to your T position. If you have a remote control provided with your hearing aid, there's much more flexibility in noisy situations.

For listening on the telephone: Hold the earpiece near the microphone of your aid. If you wear an in-the-ear aid, hold the earpiece a little way from your aid to avoid any whistling. Alternatively you can use the Telecoil if you have one. It is best to experiment and find what is the best position for you.

For listening to TV, radio, or music: If you don't have a telecoil, headphones can be used. Place the headphones so that the sound feeds into the microphone of the aid. An infra-red system may also be used. If your aid has a telecoil, use a neckloop or room loop.

In public places: In churches, theatres, cinemas, or other places where an audio loop system has been installed, switch to the T position on your aid. Look for the

blue International ear sign to tell you that an assistive listening system has been installed for your benefit.

For more information ask for SHHH Information Sheets 5, 8 and 9: "**Telephone Tactics**", "**What is a Telecoil?**" and "**Assistive Listening Devices**".

MAINTAINING YOUR HEARING AID

Make yourself familiar with your own aid through reading brochures, instructions and close examination. Ask your hearing aid provider for relevant printed material.

- Always keep the aid dry and away from heat
- Remove it when you bathe, shower or sleep.
- Handle gently – do not knock or drop.
- Protect the aid from hairspray or powder.
- Ask your provider for a dri-aid kit if you perspire heavily or there is condensation.

Cleaning:

- The aid body should be cleaned with a dry tissue or damp cloth – detergents should not be used.
- Gently clean wax from the sound opening and vent. Use a small blunt object such as an open paper clip or the eye of a needle, or a special earmould cleaning device.
- Be particularly careful when cleaning an in-the-ear aid – do not insert anything deeper than 3 mm (1/8") into the hole.
- For a behind-the-ear aid, the ear mould should be washed as frequently as necessary to keep it entirely free of ear wax. Wash the mould in warm soapy water, rinse well and dry thoroughly.
- Disconnect the mould by removing the flexible tubing from the rigid hook. If two aids are worn, they will most likely be different for each ear. It is important to mark the aids 'left' and 'right' to avoid reconnecting them to the wrong moulds.
- Dry and take care to remove all moisture from the flexible tubing. Flick the tube smartly to remove drops of water or use a puffer. Reconnect the flexible tubing to the rigid hook.

Batteries: There are two types of battery currently in use and each comes in a variety of sizes for different aids. Make sure your provider shows you the exact type and size of battery you will require and how to put them in and out. Remember to take the paper tab off the battery before placing it in the aid.

- Batteries can deteriorate quickly. Handle with clean hands and ALWAYS carry a spare battery with you. The time a battery lasts depends on many things such as the type of aid, the amount of use etc.

- Always keep batteries in a safe place away from children. Dispose of them carefully at all times.

TROUBLESHOOTING – IF YOUR AID ISN'T WORKING SATISFACTORILY

Given normal care and maintenance, your hearing aid will usually perform consistently over time – but problems do arise. If your aid is not functioning well:

- Check batteries and replace - *see comments above*.
- Check whether drops of moisture have formed in the flexible tubing – this can happen in humid weather. Disconnect the tubing and clear out the moisture with a puffer, or by flicking the tube and mould.
- Check for an accumulation of wax in the ear mould – *see cleaning above*.
- Check for an accumulation of wax in the ear – *always see your doctor for wax removal*.
- Whistling by a hearing aid arises from feedback – the aid is hearing and amplifying its own sound. The most usual cause of this problem is incomplete insertion of the ear mould in the ear. Moulds are made either of firm acrylic, or of a more flexible material. The former are usually easier to insert. The use of a limited amount of lanolin on the sides of the mould will assist its insertion, followed by a twisting to the front so as to lock the 'horn' of the mould in behind the leading fold of the ear. When inserted correctly, if the whistling continues, it can be stopped by pressure on the mould.
- The mould itself may not be providing adequate sealing – see your hearing aid provider.
- Another cause of whistling in BTE aids could be that the flexible tubing has hardened and cracked, thus "leaking" sound. If this is the case the tubing can easily be replaced by your aid provider.
- Accumulation of wax in the ear may cause your aid to whistle – see your doctor for wax removal.

Provided there are no major changes in your hearing, a well maintained hearing aid should provide effective assistance for at least five years. Alterations to the amplification pattern of the aid can usually be made by your audiologist if there are minor changes in your hearing during that time. If you feel your hearing has changed in any way, go back to your hearing aid provider.