

# How to... Help your parents live well with hearing loss.

NO. 2 IN A SERIES OF  
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WHEN THEY GET OLDER



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# A guide to helping parents manage hearing loss well

Has your dad ever arrived for Christmas dinner and insisted on the Queen's Speech at full volume? Does your mum just smile and nod but not join in conversation anymore? Do you feel you're not being listened to?

Yes, we're on the vexed topic of hearing loss and what to do about it.

When a parent isn't joining in the conversation, it's easy to assume they're not interested. It could be though that they just can't hear enough to make a contribution. Equally, if they talk over everyone else, there could be a reason for that too. We lose our hearing so gradually that we often don't realise what's happening. Your elders may well be resistant to the suggestion that it's their problem. They'd rather think it's you mumbling.

Hearing loss is a major milestone on the path to old age, and it's depressing.

Actually, if your parent is suffering from hearing loss, they are far from alone. As we get older the tiny hair cells in our ears are affected by gradual wear and tear. More than half of over 60s in the UK experience this hearing loss, known as presbycusis.

A report entitled **Hearing screening for life** addresses the issue of hearing loss amongst our ageing population. It describes the ill-health and isolation that people can face as their hearing deteriorates. The report calls on the National Screening Committee to propose screening for hearing impairments at the age of 65 in order to reduce the number of people affected by hearing loss in the UK.

## Hearing loss and dementia

Without wanting to alarm, there have been **reports** that hearing loss as part of the ageing process is connected to the onset of dementia.

Certainly there are currently calls for dementia patients to be assessed for hearing loss so that both conditions can be managed more effectively together. Action on Hearing Loss and University College London are pressing the NHS in England to introduce a **joined-up approach** to improve diagnosis, reduce the risk of exacerbating dementia symptoms, and avoid residential care before it's really needed.



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YOU MAY THINK YOU  
DRIVE A QUIET CAR, BUT  
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FRUSTRATING.

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## What you can do to help

We'll talk about the obvious solution of hearing aids later, but it's important to remember that they don't entirely solve the problem. People with hearing difficulties will still need patience, even with the help of technology. Loss of hearing is a disability. People don't do it on purpose to annoy. If you have children, they'll need to understand this too.

These tips are helpful whether or not your parent uses hearing aids or other assistive technology – or refuses to admit to the problem. We recommend you share your successful strategies quietly with family and friends, so they can keep the conversation going without making a big deal of it.

### Lip-reading

It always helps if the hard-of-hearing person can read your lips while you're talking. Face your parent, enunciate clearly and don't cover your mouth.

### How fast to talk

Speak at the rate you would normally do and don't over-exaggerate the words. Slow down if it helps but don't make anyone feel like you think they're stupid too.

### Good lighting

Good lighting will help, although having your back to a window will put your face in shadow making it difficult to lipread.

### Whether to repeat or not

If someone asks you to repeat a part of what you said, it's tempting to start from the beginning and say it all differently. This can be really frustrating if your listener just wants you to repeat the last part of a sentence because they didn't catch enough of it to guess its

meaning. Start by doing exactly what you were asked. If that doesn't work, then think of a clearer, simpler way of saying it.

### **Conversation while travelling**

Bear in mind that your parents will be bothered by noises that you don't think about. You may think you drive a quiet car, but the engine and road noise may be enough to make conversation frustrating. And if your parent is in the back of the car, you'll be talking away from them, making hearing what you say even harder.

The same is true of walking. If you're struggling to slow down to your parent's walking pace and are often out in front, they won't hear what you say unless you turn round every time. Side by side is better.

### **Pubs, cafes and restaurants**

If you're eating or drinking out, pick establishments that don't have piped music or televisions in the background. If there is noise, sit as far away from the source as possible. Again, sitting in a good light and at a small table so you're not too far away from each other can all help. A room that is softly furnished is good too, with carpets and tablecloths rather than tiles and glass.

*Tip. The sound of chairs being dragged on flagstones may be like nails down a blackboard to your ears, but it can be far worse to someone wearing a hearing aid. Choose environments carefully.*

### **A chorus of voices**

If you're having a family get together, be aware that the noise levels, with many people talking at once, will make it hard for your parent to hear any conversation. If they've gone quiet, chances are they've given up trying. You can help them by repeating what people are saying to them.

### **Parties and events**

At a big event, like a wedding or party, think about the seating. Long rows of tables mean that your parent won't be able to lip read anyone further down the table. Big round tables are a barrier as well – the people on the other side are too far away to hear. Small round or rectangular tables probably work best.

### **Taking a break from conversation**

Sometimes, trying to work out what people are saying just gets too tiring. Be understanding about lapses in attention, and try giving your parent a rest from conversation for a while.



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SUB-TITLES CAN BE AN  
ABSOLUTE BOON – WHEN  
THEY WORK.

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## Watching television

Action on Hearing Loss has **produced a report on the effectiveness of sub-titles**. Delays and accuracy of live events, such as news programmes and sports broadcasting, are hard to avoid. There are problems with other programmes too. Many, such as older repeats on cable channels, don't carry sub-titles at all. Other issues include intermittent titles, text that gets in the way of faces and action, and accuracy.

There are some programmes where sub-titles don't really work – such as comedy shows where you can see the punch line long before it's delivered.

Night-time programmes for insomniacs tend to be worse. We've even seen one programme's sub-titles imposed on another programme's pictures.

***Tip. If you're buying DVDs or similar for your parent, or considering technology such as personal video recorders (PVRs), check that they offer sub-title capabilities.***

## Where to get hearing aids?

### Getting started with simple online tests

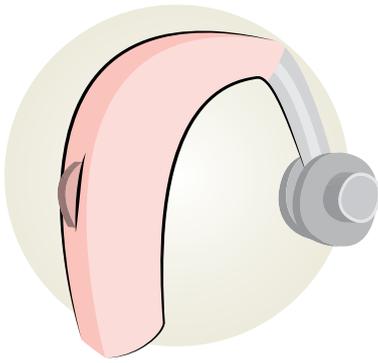
If our tips aren't working as well as they might, and everyone's getting frustrated by raised voices and endless repetition, it's probably time for someone to take a hearing test.

There's a neat little **online test** you can try out that might hasten the decision as to whether a trip to the audiologist should be the next move for your parent. It's one of several that you can find on the web, including **one that doesn't require headphones**.

If and when your parent decides that you're right, and they could be helped by a hearing aid of some description, you have plenty of options for every budget.

You now have choices as to where to go for hearing aids:

- » National Health
- » High St stores, often attached to opticians
- » Independent audiologists
- » Other stores and websites



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### National Health Service

If you want to go down the NHS route – and it's definitely the cheapest – the first step will have to be a doctor's appointment, followed probably by a referral to a consultant at a local hospital. Waiting times differ across the country, but be prepared to wait a while for the appointment confirmation letter.

Since April 2012 some patients in England have been able to visit High St stores for NHS hearing aid provision, under the [Any Qualified Provider scheme](#). Your parent's GP will know about the choices available in their area, or they may refer the case to a local management centre, which should contact your parent with details.

*Tip. When you don't hear well, it seems that the hospital audiology department employs the most quietly spoken nurses and doctors in the NHS. It may be very helpful to offer your parent some company at their appointment so that you can act as their ears. There can be a lot to remember too, so four ears are better than two.*

The appointment will include a hearing test which will normally take place in a very quiet room. The patient will be asked to listen for sounds through headphones and press a button whenever they hear one.

There may be a choice of hearing aids available, but it's likely to be a smaller range than with private options.

The audiologist will make a mould of the patient's inner ear with the aim of providing a hearing aid that fits and is comfortable.

*Tip. If someone is taking your relative to the hospital appointment, they will need to book plenty of time for it, as waiting times can be long. It's worth arriving early as parking can be difficult, and they will need plenty of change to cover the cost of the car park.*

Hospital departments do work to targets for seeing patients, but recent reports have suggested that [follow-up appointments are being delayed](#) as budgets continue to constrict.

### High St Stores

You shouldn't need a doctor's referral to pop into a High St store, and many offer reduced price or free hearing tests.

The consumer group [Which? looked at this channel](#) a while ago and was disappointed to find that many didn't provide properly soundproofed environments for hearing tests. You can't get a good result if there is background noise.

Prices for High St hearing aids will vary but will probably start in the mid hundreds, and your parent will have more choice of styles than in a hospital. There may only be one choice of manufacturer though.

If you think your parent is having any problems with what's supplied – it's not comfortable, it's not working properly – go back. It's important to get the aids right or they'll be a waste of money as your parents won't use them.

***Tip. As with opticians and pharmacists, staff in the store will have different levels of training. Ask for the expert if you need more advanced information and advice.***

### **Independents**

You'll find independents based in optician shops, but not owned by them, in complementary health centres, in their own surgeries – anywhere that a small business can use to see clients. Some will even make house calls (but remember the local noise factor can affect test results).

Some are truly independent and will offer a range of aids from different manufacturers, while others act as representatives of a particular brand. Prices can run from hundreds to thousands, and vary widely from one dispenser to another. It is definitely worth getting a couple of quotes. As with hospitals, you are likely to get moulds made to create a personalised hearing aid.

**The Health and Care Professional Council** lists approved high street and independent dispensers that you can search for via their surname or registration number. Should you need to find a hearing aid dispenser local to you or your parent you can visit **The British Society of Hearing Aid Audiologists** website to conduct an online search.

### **Other stores and websites**

Buying an in-the-ear or over-the-ear hearing aid without professional advice and fitting is unlikely to deliver great results. However, there are other aids that you can buy that might help in the short term.

***Tip. Check that the hearing aids are comfortable. No amount of benefit will encourage your parent to wear it if it hurts. And for older, more frail people, it's particularly important to make sure the aid is easy to handle and insert, and simple to replace the battery.***



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HEARING AIDS SHOULD BE CLEANED REGULARLY, AND THE WAX GUARDS OR OTHER CONSUMABLES REPLACED.

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## Running costs

Hearing aids should be cleaned regularly, and the wax guards or other consumables replaced. If the hearing aid stops working, it might be the battery or it might just need a clean, so it's worth checking those points before trekking back to the dispenser.

If your parent has chosen free National Health hearing aids, batteries should be included. Batteries can be picked up for free and fairly easily, but repairs will require attendance in person at set times and may incur a small cost. Most will now need a GP referral for a repair since the introduction of payment by results.

Bear in mind that it's unlikely that National Health audiologists will make house calls, so it will be down to you to organise how you get your parent to any appointments. If they're in a nursing home, for example, that could mean a private ambulance at worst. Most hospitals offer hospital transport for those that really need it, but you may not be able to accompany them in the hospital transport if other patients need it also.

***Tip. Hearing aids should come with a case to carry them in. If not, find one that's hard-wearing, easy to carry in a pocket, and easy to find every time it's put down. We don't have statistics on the number of hours in a lifetime spent looking for a hearing aid, but we believe it's pretty significant!***

If you've opted for private care, then you need to factor in the cost of batteries (about £20 pa/per aid), filters and any other replaceable parts (about £5-15 pa/per aid), annual check-ups and maintenance (variable). And remember that hearing aids don't last forever - Budget for replacements every 3-5 years.

It could also be worth adding the aids to your parent's household insurance in case they lose them – very easy if they carry the aids around in a case for special occasions rather than in their ears.

***Tip. If your parent reaches the point where they need to go into a care home, train the staff on how to take the aid in and out successfully. The possibility of losing or breaking the hearing aid will rise so label the box and even consider getting a backup aid. Also check if they will insure aids or whether you can get contents insurance if in a care home.***



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**BONE CONDUCTION HEARING AIDS THAT USE A HEADBAND TO DELIVER SOUND BY VIBRATIONS THROUGH THE SKULL (USUALLY ATTACHED TO THE BODY WORN HEARING AID).**

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## Types of hearing aids

### **NHS hearing aids include:**

- » behind-the-ear hearing aids where an ear mould sits inside the ear and the aid itself sits behind the ear
- » a box containing a microphone that clips to the wearer's clothing or fits in a pocket, with a lead connecting the box to an ear mould
- » bone conduction hearing aids that use a headband to deliver sound by vibrations through the skull (usually attached to the body worn hearing aid)

If your parent is willing to pay the price for private hearing aids, the choice is much wider, and the aids can be as unobtrusive as they like. They can sit in the ear, in the outer reaches of the ear canal or completely in the canal so that they aren't seen at all. There are also options such as aids attached to spectacles.

Different hearing aids may have different environmental options. Traditionally very popular but not always available with smaller digital hearing aids, **the T loop** makes conversation easier in banks and shops. Your parent will need to switch to the loop setting – probably by pressing a button.

Other options that might be available include a restaurant setting – cutting out background noise – and a phone setting.

***Tip. If the hearing aid is successful, you may find your parent starts talking more quietly whenever they're wearing it, so you now have to get them to speak up.***

Once your parent has a hearing aid, you may want to change their phone. Older phones don't work as well with aids as newer ones that contain a coil adapted to hearing aids. **Search for hearing aid compatible phones** to find out what's available for those your parent has or help your parent learn how to use the T loop. Other phones are available that have an amplifier as well as a loop, such as Amplicoms but do check with your parent's network provider as many offer their own phones compatible with the services they have in place for elderly customers.

***Tip. If your parent complains about feedback on the phone, try positioning the hearing piece away from the ear or above it on the bone. If they can't find a comfortable position, try another phone that's specifically described as hearing-aid compatible.***



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THE ROYAL NATIONAL  
INSTITUTE FOR THE  
DEAF SELLS EQUIPMENT  
FROM VIBRATING  
ALARM CLOCKS AND  
TV-LISTENING AIDS  
TO HEARING AID  
MAINTENANCE KITS  
AND AMPLIFIED PHONES.

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### Other aids

If your parent doesn't want a hearing aid or maybe doesn't need that much help yet, there are other options to help them use the telephone or listen to the television. Take a look at some of the online shops (just search for hearing aids) and charities such as [Action on Hearing Loss](#) for more information on assistive technology.

Reviews of available technology can be found on the [Hearing Times](#) website.

## Like to know more?

How does hearing loss happen as we age? [Hearing Link](#) provides a useful explanation and information on living with hearing loss.

The Royal National Institute for the Deaf is now called Action on Hearing Loss and its [website](#) is packed with helpful advice. The charity also sells equipment from vibrating alarm clocks and TV-listening aids to hearing aid maintenance kits and amplified phones.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Ben Mann of independent audiology service [Click Hearing](#) for sanity-checking and contributing to this guide.

## Author(s)

We hope this guide has given you some idea about how to help your parent live well with hearing loss including where to find the right hearing aids at the right price.

***Our guides are intended to offer food for thought. Please consult professionals for advice on all medical, financial and legal issues.***

This guide was created by the content director of When They Get Older, [Kathy Lawrence](#), working writer [Rebecca Lenton](#) and the creative design team from [ABA](#). Our experts have drawn on experiences of contemporaries as well as research to create a guide that we hope you'll find truly helpful and easy to put into practice.

This is one of a series of guides created by the [When They Get Older](#) team to provide tips and advice to people who want to support their ageing parents in the best way they can.

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## OUR TOP TIPS TO HELP YOUR PARENTS LIVE WELL WITH HEARING LOSS

- » **Don't assume that a hearing aid is a cure-all. It just helps**
- » **However frustrating it is to keep repeating yourself, remember that no one chooses to lose their hearing**
- » **Choose locations for conversations carefully**
- » **Speak clearly – no mumbling!**
- » **Let your parent see your lips moving**
- » **Encourage your family and friends to do the same**
- » **If your parent has a hearing aid and won't wear it, find out why and fix it**

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Did you find the information in this “How to” guide helpful? Perhaps you've got some great tips for helping parents live well with hearing loss that we haven't included. Have your say and discover more of our free stuff at [When They Get Older](#). Follow us on [Twitter](#), like us on [Facebook](#) or repin us on [Pinterest](#) for updates on health news relevant to you and your parent.