

Is Your Hearing OK? Are You Sure?

About twelve million people in the UK have hearing loss greater than 25 decibels. In other words, roughly 20 per cent or one in five of the population need help with hearing loss. That figure rises to 40 per cent for people over 50, and to 70 per cent for people over 70, yet only two million people in the UK have hearing aids. The message to retired people who have not yet done anything about their hearing is clear: get tested! Hearing tests are free with the NHS and with private audiologists, and taking a test does not commit you to purchasing a hearing aid.

If you decide to go private, it's certainly worth shopping around to find which hearing aids are best for you. Some of the well-known high street hearing aid providers only supply one make of hearing aid, while independent audiologists may offer a greater variety. The technology of hearing aids has changed hugely in recent years. The latest aids are more powerful and more flexible in different hearing situations, and some now have rechargeable batteries. NHS hearing aids now use virtually the same technologies as private ones, and they include free batteries, which in many cases can be collected from local libraries as well as NHS locations.

If you have any queries or concerns about hearing loss for you or one of your family, a good place to start is Hearing Link, part of a national charity that includes Hearing Dogs UK, which provides all kinds of advice and support. The RNID (the Royal National Institute for Deaf People) can also offer help, as can various local charities depending on where you live. Help is also available for people who have tinnitus or ringing in the ears, which can take a variety of forms. For example, some people with tinnitus use a special pillow which can play soothing sounds to help them get to sleep.

Many u3as already provide help for members with hearing loss. This may include use of a hearing loop which enables users to pick up sound directly in their hearing aids. Those organising meetings should check whether a loop is available and see that it works, and make sure that speakers are well lit. Advice to speakers includes making sure that they have everyone's attention before they start. They should be asked not to speak when turning away from the audience, for example to write on a whiteboard. To help lip readers, speakers should maintain eye contact and avoid covering their mouth. Visual aids and gestures should be used where possible. Speakers should be encouraged to take their time, be patient and speak clearly without shouting. It's important to check that everyone has heard and understood. When taking questions, repeat them, as hearing-impaired members may well not have heard them. If you have trouble hearing a speaker, don't be shy: you won't be the only one with hearing loss and you will probably be helping others if you ask for things to be repeated. For online and hybrid meetings, it's important to make sure that captions are enabled and to make copies of presentations available. Apps on mobile phone may be helpful too. For example, speech-to-text software such as Google Live Transcribe and NAL Scribe can be used.

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Note: To contact Hearing Link, call or text 01844 348111., or email enquiries@hearinglink.org.