

Got a question for our experts? Want to air your views? Have your say on these pages. This month, questions on hearing aids

ASK THE EXPERTS



Antonia Chitty answers your queries on hearing aids



Volume control

When we visited some elderly relatives, we noticed they were using earphones to watch TV. They could hear the set perfectly, even though it was at normal volume. Can you tell me more about this?

Marius Pope
Tunbridge Wells

There are a variety of systems that can help when watching TV. Some use standard headphones; others use 'stetoclips', which hang under the chin. Sound is transmitted from the TV to the headphones, and then directly to the ears, by means of wire or infrared. (The more sophisticated systems allow you to adjust and fine tune volume control and other settings.) Other systems have a microphone built directly into the stetoclip sets, which amplifies any sounds in the

room (including a TV). Models cost from about £20 to £150. Some are specifically designed for people with hearing loss. If you use a hearing aid, an alternative is a 'loop system', which works with the 'T' position on your hearing aid.

If you have hearing loss, your local social worker for the hearing impaired can advise on the best system for you. Alternatively, try RNID and Hearing Concern – see 'Contacts and links', p57.

Buzz word

I get a loud buzzing in my hearing aid from my mobile phone. What causes this?

S J Davidson
Ballyclare

Mobile phones contain microwave transmitters which interfere with hearing aids, creating noise. Some aids are more sensitive than others.

Newer aids, particularly digital ones, may be better, but there are no hard and fast rules as to which work best with a mobile. The level of interference also varies between phones.

There are some accessories you can get to help with this problem. For example, Nokia and Orange sell devices which you can attach to the phone, and Sensorcom makes a device that sits behind the ear, next to the aid – contact RNID for more details (see p57).

Before buying a phone, try it out with your hearing aid to check you will be able to use it.

Going digital

What are the advantages of switching from an analogue to a digital hearing aid?

David Henderson
by e-mail

The main advantage of digital aids is that they can minimise feedback and background noise. Most of them can also be programmed to suit your hearing loss and different listening environments (though some analogue ones can also do this). On the downside, digital aids are currently very expensive. Nor are they widely available on the NHS in all parts of the UK, although RNID is working to ensure that in the future they will be.

Remember that any aid will work well only if the dispenser adjusts the settings carefully, and no aid can restore perfect hearing.

Double effect

Is it worth having a hearing aid for both ears?

Barrie Power
by e-mail

GET IN TOUCH

Our experts are now looking for questions on **ISPs, Which? and Consumers' Association** and **utility companies**. Send your questions or comments for publication by post or fax to 'Letters page' at our Hertford address, p58, or by e-mail to experts@which.net. Which? Online subscribers can also contact us via one of our forum groups.

We give **£15**-worth of Which? Books vouchers to the sender of our star letter; senders of all other letters printed receive **£10** in vouchers. We may edit letters, or use only an extract. We regret that our experts will answer only questions that we publish.



WRITEBACK

Share your views with other members

A It depends on your individual hearing loss, so consult your audiologist. If you have total hearing loss in one ear, two aids probably won't help. However, if you have some loss in both ears, two aids could well improve sound quality, speech recognition and understanding. More balanced hearing will also make it easier to tell where a sound is coming from. Two aids can mean that you need less amplification, so background noise is less irritating and feedback diminished. Two hearing aids can also reduce the risk of 'auditory deprivation', where the brain loses some ability to process sound information because of a continued lack of sound.

Loud protest

Last August, I was fitted with private analogue aids which were adjusted when I collected them. However, I find that everything's still too loud. How do I get this resolved?

C R Brooks
Steyning

A You should return to the dispenser who sold you the aids. It may take several attempts before the best results possible for your hearing loss are achieved. Follow-up and tuning should have been offered when the aids were fitted. If the dispenser doesn't resolve the problem, contact the Hearing Aid Council (HAC) which regulates private dispensers. It can fine and even strike off dispensers who don't comply with its code of practice. Write to the HAC with details of the problem, copies of any documents, and details of the dispenser involved.

Ice debate heats up Canon blasted

I cannot believe I am in a minority by welcoming the Lords' ruling that allows councils not to grit icy roads (November 2001, p6). I have every personal sympathy for the victims of road accidents, but why do we have to blame others for the misfortune? Behaviour on a road always requires judgement. Icy conditions are a common enough hazard, and to demand that a council should be on the spot with the salt at the right time is outrageous.

Brian Salter
Milton Keynes

At home with VAT

I'm self-employed and work from home and so can offset a proportion of the VAT on my household bills against the VAT I charge. Some utility companies are sending out bills that say they are not tax invoices, even though they include a VAT charge. Is this legal?

Richard Drew
Tunbridge Wells

A A VAT invoice must show the VAT separately and display the company's VAT-registered number. Companies that sell mainly to individuals (as opposed to businesses) may not automatically issue an invoice that would be acceptable to re-claim VAT. If you pay your bills monthly by direct debit you may receive statements rather than invoices, and these won't be accepted for VAT purposes. You can ask the utility company to issue a VAT invoice – it must comply with this request.

Canon retains spare parts for its camera for only five to seven years after the end of production. I think this is too short, especially for expensive SLR cameras which may have had the additional investment of accessories, such as lenses. Nikon and Pentax's policy of retaining spares for up to ten years is much more reasonable.

Brian McBeth
Oxford

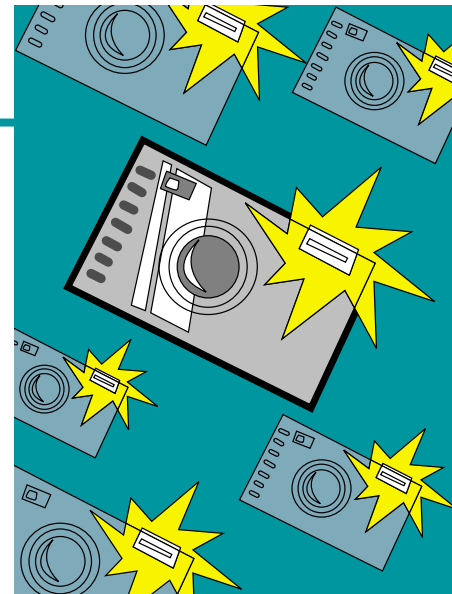
A Manufacturers are not legally required to carry on making spares for discontinued products. Nor do they have to warn retailers that they're planning to discontinue a model. So Canon is doing more than it needs to. Nikon and Pentax may hold spares for up to ten years, but it depends on the cost, type and popularity of the camera.

Soft on software

Why is it that software seems to get special treatment when it comes to consumer rights? End Use Licence Agreements (EULAs) avoid almost all responsibility for defects and disclaim any responsibility for consequential damage.

Colin Hogben
Abingdon

A There's no easy answer. Your statutory rights when you buy software are the same as when you buy, say, a toaster – it must be of satisfactory quality, fit for its purpose, and match its description. But for software it's not easy to say precisely what 'satisfactory quality' means. Almost all software has bugs which are



only detected after its launch (manufacturers provide free 'patches' to fix problems – you download them from their websites). There's also the problem that damage to files or documents caused by a software defect is not really a tangible loss, and, as such, it would be difficult to make a claim. EULAs contain the manufacturer's standard terms of business – there's no contract between user and manufacturer. When you buy software, your contract is with the retailer, and so EULAs have little relevance.

Money markets

By using the mortgage comparison websites in your November 2001 article on haggling for money products (p42), I found a better deal than that from my current lender – despite being self-employed and not wanting to be tied into any redemption penalties for early repayment. When I told my current lender I was planning to switch, it offered to cut my interest rate to match the new deal. When I declined, it offered me £500 to stay. I was amazed. It goes to show that the financial sector is prepared to haggle like fruit and veg market traders.

Aleric Linden
Essex