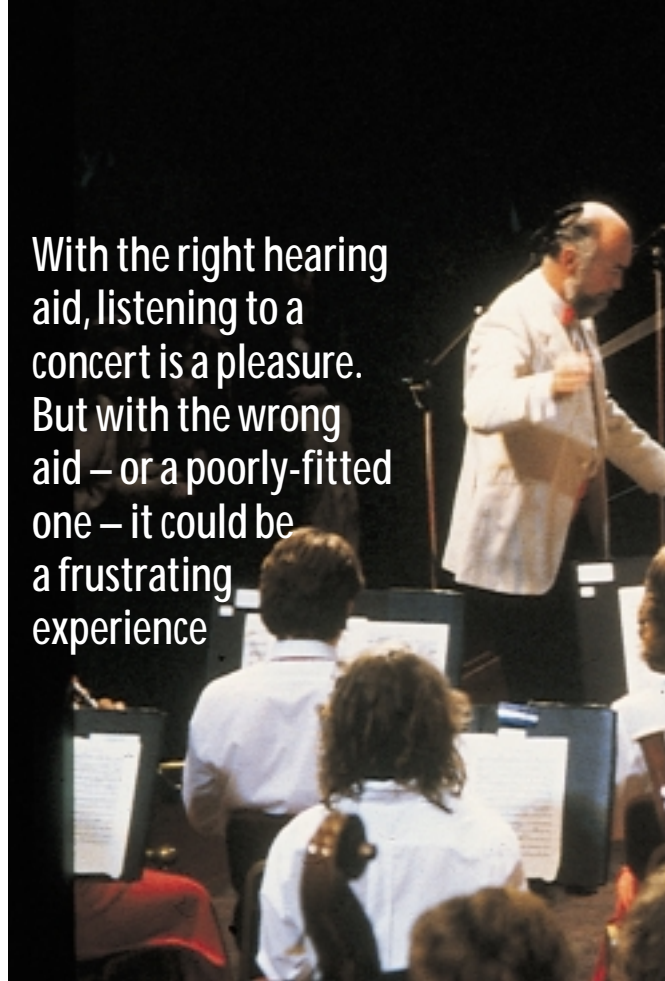


Music to my ears?

With the right hearing aid, listening to a concert is a pleasure. But with the wrong aid – or a poorly-fitted one – it could be a frustrating experience



OUR SURVEY

During October and November 2000 we contacted 7,000 people on Hearing Concern's database. We received replies from 1,615 people, of whom 1,525 told us that they used a personally-fitted hearing aid.

Fifty seven per cent of those in our survey were aged 65 and over. The vast majority had used a hearing aid for more than five years. About 22 per cent reported a gradual loss of hearing with no known cause, 20 per cent attributed their gradual loss to age, and 13 per cent have had hearing difficulties since birth. Other reasons given for hearing loss included exposure to noise and illness.

About two million people now wear a hearing aid, but another three million could benefit from one, according to the Medical Research Council. There are many decisions involved in getting a hearing aid, though. Should you spend hundreds or even thousands of pounds on a private aid, or join the NHS waiting list? Would a digital aid be better than an analogue one? Which are the best types to go for, and is there any difference between the many brands? To try to answer these questions, we joined forces with Hearing Concern, a national organisation that offers information, support and advice for people with hearing problems, to develop a survey of hearing aid users. We also recruited help from the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) in developing our questionnaire.

KEY RESULTS

Overall, digital aids were rated more highly than analogue aids in our survey. Almost nine out of ten digital aid users were satisfied compared with nearly seven out of ten analogue aid users.

People who bought a private aid were more satisfied with it than those who got one on the NHS – eight out of ten private aid users were satisfied with their aids, compared with just over six in ten NHS users.

BRANDS OF AID

Widex, Phonak and Siemens were the most commonly worn brands of hearing aid in our survey, followed by Oticon, Starkey, Philips, and Danavox.

There is a wide range of brands on the market, but only the first three were worn by enough users to give us information on satisfaction and reliability. More than eight out of ten people whose aids were made by Widex, Phonak and Siemens were satisfied with them and they were rated as being equally reliable.

TYPE OF AID

There are several types of hearing aid available. To some extent the type you choose will depend on your hearing loss, but information from our users should help you decide which one might be best for you. However, we can't tell you which model of hearing aid to buy as people have different needs depending on their degree and type of hearing loss. Hearing aids are fitted individually for this reason. As with all aids, how well they work depends partially on how well they are adjusted by the dispenser or audiologist.

Behind-the-ear aids (BTE) Nearly seven out of ten BTE aid users were satisfied with their aid. This type was worn by more than eight out of ten people in our survey. The microphone, electronics and receiver sit in a small plastic case behind the ear. Sound passes through tubing over the top of the ear, then through a tube to the ear mould, which channels sounds into the ear canal. BTE aids were more common among people with severe to profound hearing loss, as smaller aids are less likely to be powerful enough.

In-the-ear aids (ITE) You are more likely to have to go private to get an ITE aid. Just over one in ten people in our survey wore one, and again seven out of ten were satisfied with it. As the name suggests, all parts of the aid are in a case that fits inside the ear. Users liked their unobtrusive appearance and their performance. There were many positive comments about how they helped with hearing speech, made sounds easier to distinguish and reduced background

TYPE OF HEARING AID





noise. ITE aids are not as powerful as BTE ones, so are less suitable for people with severe hearing loss. More people found it difficult to change batteries in the smaller ITE aids than with BTE ones, but both types were rated equally for ease of use and reliability. **In-the-canal aids (ITC)** These are even smaller than ITE aids and fit partially in the ear canal. ITC aids are more suitable for people with very mild hearing loss. **Completely-in-the-canal aids (CIC)** These aids sit so far inside the ear canal that they can barely be seen. They are worn mostly by people with the mildest hearing loss.

Body-worn aids (BW) The microphone, amplifier and battery are contained in a box which is carried in a pocket, and the receiver sits in an ear mould. BW aids are most likely to be used by people with profound hearing loss or those who have difficulty handling small objects, but they are rarely dispensed today.

There were insufficient responses from people wearing ITC, CIC or BW aids to compare them. Each type was worn by only 2 per cent or less of our users.

PROGRAMMABLE AIDS

Some analogue and most digital aids are programmable, which means they have various settings for different situations. For example, one setting might be more suitable for listening to a concert, and another for conversations. People with programmable aids made favourable comments about their sound quality, effectiveness for hearing speech, and their ability to reduce background noise.

ANALOGUE VERSUS DIGITAL

Most hearing aids use analogue technology but digital aids are becoming increasingly popular. They are generally more sophisticated and offer more options than analogue ones, such as different listening

programs, although different models vary. For example, some have directional microphones or volume control while others do not, and some have only one listening program while others may have up to three programs.

About 10 per cent of people in our survey had a digital aid, and around 80 per cent had an analogue one. People using digital aids gave the highest satisfaction scores in our survey, largely it seems because of their better performance. Digital aids were praised for providing good sound quality and there were fewer complaints about background noise or sound distortion. More digital-aid users rated them highly for hearing speech than analogue users.

Digital aids aren't best for everyone, though. One user who had tried both types commented that they found the analogue NHS one more helpful. Fewer analogue aid users mentioned problems with changing batteries and more said their aid was easy to adjust, possibly because more analogue users wear BTE aids, which are easier to handle.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Private or NHS?

More people were satisfied with private aids than with NHS aids, but our survey showed you can expect to pay over £1,000 for a private aid.

Behind-the-ear or in-the-ear?

Equal numbers of BTE and ITE wearers were satisfied with their aids. ITE aids were liked because of their discreet appearance, but your choice may depend on your type of hearing loss.

Analogue or digital aids?

More people were satisfied with digital aids in our survey, even though they were the most expensive type of aid. Programmable aids were also preferred.

Which make of hearing aid?

The most commonly worn brands were Widex, Phonak and Siemens. More than eight out of ten people who wore these brands were satisfied with them. They were rated equally for reliability.

NHS DIGITAL PILOTS

Addenbrookes, Cambridge
James Paget Healthcare,
Suffolk
Royal Free Hampstead
(Royal National Throat,
Nose and Ear Hospital),
London
Forest Healthcare, London
Bradford Hospitals
Leeds Teaching
Trafford Healthcare
East Berkshire Community
Health
Royal Berkshire and Battle
Hospitals
Queens Medical Centre
University Nottingham
Sheffield Children's
Hospital
University Hospital
Birmingham
Royal Shrewsbury
City Hospitals Sunderland
Morecambe Bay Hospitals
United Bristol Healthcare
Royal Cornwall Hospitals
Kings Mill Centre for
Healthcare Services,
Stamford

BACKGROUND NOISE

Background noise can make speech difficult to hear in noisy environments. It was the biggest problem for our hearing aid users – especially for those with analogue aids. Although no hearing aid can eliminate background noise entirely, directional microphones help in some situations. Beware of advertising claims to cut background noise, though – users commented that these claims tended to be exaggerated. In our survey, fewer people with ITE or digital aids complained about background noise. The position of ITE aids in the ear can help shield them from picking up extraneous noises, while digital aids can be programmed to reduce sounds at certain frequencies.

T-loop systems can help diminish background noise in public places such as concerts, plays or at public announcements. They are a type of aerial that emits signals which hearing aid users can tune in to if they have a T-switch on their aid, to make sounds clearer and reduce background noise. More than seven out of ten people in our survey said they liked the T-loop system. However, several people complained that it isn't available in many public places and, when it is, it's not well maintained.

WAX AND MOISTURE PROBLEMS

No matter what type of aid they wore, two thirds of the people in our survey complained about wax and moisture in their aid. One person said: 'Moulds and tubes cause more problems than the aids'.

NHS VERSUS PRIVATE

Three quarters of users in our survey had NHS aids. About 30 models are available on the NHS, and these are mostly BTE analogue aids. Eight out of ten private aid users were satisfied with their aids, compared with just over six in ten NHS users. Twice as many private aid users were very satisfied compared with analogue users. This difference could be due to the different types of aid available privately and on the NHS, and easier access to private care for initial appointments and follow-up visits.

Cost is a big barrier to private aids. Three quarters of those who bought their aid in the year prior to our survey paid over £1,000. Batteries and repairs add to these costs – batteries can cost between £5 and £45 a year, but the NHS supplies batteries and carries out repairs free of charge. Digital aids are the most expensive type, but manufacturers claim that costs will soon fall to less than £1,000.

Digital aids on the NHS

In the past, digital aids were only available on the NHS on an individual case basis – for example, if someone specifically needed a digital aid to carry out their job. Numbers dispensed have been restricted by limited hospital funds. Recently, though, 20 hospital trusts (see 'NHS digital pilots', left) were given additional funding to supply digital hearing aids on the NHS. The government says it will extend this trial to other areas of the country if it proves successful.

TOP TIPS

ON BUYING A HEARING AID

- If you're concerned about your hearing, see your GP as soon as possible. They will check for causes of hearing loss, such as wax or infection, and may refer you to a specialist to check the health of your ears before referring you for a hearing test. In some areas, GPs can refer people over 60 directly for a hearing test.
- If tests show you have hearing loss that can be helped with a hearing aid, an impression of your ear will be taken for an ear mould, and you'll be asked to return at a later date to be fitted with the aid and to be taught how to use it.
- Ask the audiologist whether you'd benefit from a T-switch (they're present on most NHS aids but not on some very small aids) or other programmable function.
- It may take a while to get used to your aid but if it doesn't improve your hearing or is uncomfortable, go back to the audiologist for more help.
- If you opt for a private aid, remember that you're still entitled to NHS help and you should visit your GP first to check the cause of your hearing loss.
- Visit a few dispensers (who must be registered with the Hearing Aid Council) and choose the one that you feel makes the best recommendation.
- The Hearing Aid Council Code of Practice, which all private dispensers must abide by, requires dispensers to give you written terms and conditions of sale.
- RNID recommends that you ask for a money-back guarantee on all aids, and at least a 30-day trial period during which you can return the aid for a refund.

HEAR HEAR FOR NEW NHS AID

Val Vaughan has severe hearing loss and has worn NHS aids for many years. Recently, she noticed that she was missing some parts of conversations and so was referred for tests for a cochlear implant – where a receiver is implanted under the skin and linked via electrodes to the cochlea (the inner ear). However, Val's hearing wasn't yet poor enough for an implant. Trying a digital aid would have been an option, but as these weren't available on the NHS in her area, an audiologist suggested she should try some new analogue aids that had just become available on the NHS. Since receiving the new aid, Val said: 'I can now hear sounds that I haven't heard for many years, such as aeroplanes, our gas boiler and even the telephone ringing'. Val puts this vast improvement in her hearing down to the technological improvements of her new aid.



DISPOSABLE HEARING AIDS

Disposable aids may be an option for people with mild or moderate hearing loss. Songbird disposable aids are now available from new Boots Hearingcare centres. You'll need a consultation with a hearing aid dispenser, which costs £25. After that, aids cost £22 per month per ear. If you need an aid in both ears

this would work out at £528 a year. Because the aids are disposable, there is no need to change batteries or get the aid repaired, and they're less likely to need cleaning. Songbird claims that they will fit 80 per cent of adult ears. We'll be assessing disposable hearing aids next month in 'All change'.