

Our friendly helpline team is waiting
to answer your call or email.

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ACTION ON
HEARING
LOSS

Telephones and voice communications

THE FACTS

Telephones and voice communications

This factsheet is part of our **Equipment** range. It is written for people with hearing loss who want more information about using the telephone for voice communication.

Read this factsheet to find out:

- Can I adjust or adapt my existing phone to my hearing loss?
- How do I choose a new phone?
- What are the differences between corded and cordless phones?
- What special features should I look out for?
- How do I use the internet to make a voice call?
- What equipment do I need to make internet calls?
- Can I make internet calls without using a computer?
- Where can I get further information?
- Where can I buy products that may help?

If you would like this factsheet on audio tape, in Braille or in large print, please contact our helpline – see front page for contact details.

Can I adjust or adapt my existing phone to my hearing loss?

If you find it difficult to hear the phone ringing:

- Check to see if you can turn up the ring volume.
- Change the volume of its melody or ring tone.
- Try placing your phone on a hard surface – this will make the ring louder.

If you still can't hear your telephone ring, try adding:

- Extension bells and ringers.
- Visual call indicators
- Multi-alerting systems

If you can't hear the caller's voice try:

- A telephone amplifier.

Extension bells and ringers

You can buy extension bells that let you hear your phone ringing when you're away from it; for example, if you're in another room. There are also extension ringers that may come with a range of features, including volume control and different ring tones.

Visual call indicators

These have a flashing light and most also have a loud ring. They are mains or battery powered and can be placed on a surface or mounted on a wall. Some of these indicators also work with a table lamp, making it flash when your phone rings.

Multi-alerting systems

A multi-alerting system can help alert you to sounds in your home, such as the telephone, a crying baby, the doorbell, smoke detector or burglar alarm.

Most of the equipment uses flashing lights, vibrating pagers or loud ringers to attract your attention. For more information, see our factsheet **Sensory alerts and multi-alerting systems**.

A telephone amplifier

If you have difficulty hearing what is said over the phone, a telephone amplifier may help by making incoming speech louder. You attach the amplifier either to the earpiece of your handset, or between the phone and handset. Some products also have an inductive coupler for people who use hearing aids (see Hearing aid compatibility on page 4).

How do I choose a new phone?

Shop around until you find a phone that best suits your needs and budget. See the next sections on types and features of phones available, and these are some simple tips to help you decide what type of phone you need:

- If you can, try out a phone before buying it. Make sure it feels easy and comfortable to hold and use.
- Look for a phone with large enough buttons.
- Check that safety and instruction labels on the phone are easy to read.
- Listen to the phone's ring tones. Try changing the volume and tone until you can hear it comfortably.
- Can you adjust the volume of the handset?
- Is the phone compatible with hearing aids on the T setting?
- If you can't try out the phone in the shop, check that you can get a refund if you have problems when you try it out at home.

What are the differences between corded and cordless phones?

Corded phones have handsets attached to the unit. They are cheaper to buy and often simpler to use. Their main disadvantage is that they need to be close to a telephone socket. However, a telephone extension lead may make it easier for you to place it where you want.

Cordless phones (also known as DECT phones) allow you to walk around the house while using your phone. The handset slots into a charger unit when not in use which also charges the battery in the

handset. Their range is suitable for most homes, but you may lose reception if you take the phone outside, for example in the garden. You can buy models with more than one handset, which may allow you to use it as an intercom. Their main disadvantage is that some cordless phones can cause interference to hearing aids.

Contacting emergency services

We advise you not to have a cordless phone as your only phone because you might need to make emergency calls during a power cut. Some corded phones may also need powering from mains electricity, so check this before buying.

If you cannot make voice calls, you can contact the 999 emergency services by SMS text from your mobile phone using the **EmergencySMS** service which has been designed specifically for people with hearing loss or speech difficulties. For more information, go to www.emergencysms.org.uk or contact our helpline.

What special features should I look out for?

Different phones have different features – you'll need to decide which of the following features are most important to you.

Hearing aid compatibility

A phone described as hearing aid compatible has a built-in inductive coupler in the handset and may sound clearer if you use a hearing aid set to the T setting. A phone with an inductive coupler is not necessarily expensive: you can buy basic phones with this feature. There are also a few cordless DECT phones that are hearing aid compatible. Some hearing aid compatible phones may work better for you than others, so if you can, try them out in the shop.

Voice amplification

This feature makes the caller's voice louder. Most phones typically boost your caller's voice by 10-20 decibels (dB), so the sound will be about two to four times as loud. Some phones have an additional extra volume boost. Some also let you amplify your own voice, which may be useful if your voice is quiet or weak, or if the caller has some hearing loss.

Tone adjustment

Some phones allow you to boost or cut certain speech tones. This may make your caller's voice sound clearer.

Ring tones

Before buying a phone, try to listen to its ring tones if you can. You may be able to hear some rings better than others. Try the phone in the shop if possible, to check that the ring is loud enough for you.

Visual call indicators

Some phones have an indicator light that flashes when the phone rings, but many are not bright enough to attract your attention if you're not already looking towards them. If you need a brighter visible indicator to tell you the phone is ringing, you can get a separate call indicator light for your phone.

Phones with two handsets

These are useful if a lipspeaker is available to relay a conversation to you.

Corded phones with headsets

A few phones have a socket for a telephone headset. This lets you use your hands for other tasks, such as typing. This is why headsets are often used in offices.

Most headset phones have volume controls to adjust the sound level from the headset. You can also plug in a telephone amplifier between the telephone and headset to make the sound louder. You'll need to check for compatibility since not all headsets use the same connections.

Answering machines

Many corded and cordless telephones have an answering machine. Most allow you to listen to the message through the handset or loudspeaker, and most have a pre-recorded outgoing message or greeting. You can change this and record your own greeting. Remote access lets you listen to your messages when you're away from home.

Caller display

These phones let you see a caller's phone number before deciding whether to answer the phone.

Big button phones

If you can't hold or press things easily, or have poor eyesight, try a big button phone. The large dial buttons and large, clear labels on these phones make them easier to use. Most big button phones are corded, but there are cordless ones too.

Vibrating phones

A vibrating phone or 'bone phone' is designed for people with conductive hearing loss, a condition that affects the middle ear. A vibrating phone is basically a standard corded telephone with a vibrating earpiece, which you hold against the bone behind your ear. Speech vibrations travel by conduction through the bone to the cochlea in the inner ear. Hearing members of your household can also use the handset. This is a good product for people with conductive hearing loss.

How do I use the internet to make a voice call?

You can make and receive calls over the internet using a technology called VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) also known as 'Voice over IP' or 'Voice over broadband'. You can use either a computer or a normal telephone plugged into a special adapter.

Internet phone calls can be free or cheaper than making calls from landline and mobile phones, and call quality is often as good or better.

To use VoIP, you need a broadband internet connection. If you have a computer and use the internet, you may already have broadband. Slow 'dial-up' internet accounts are not suitable for VoIP. Many companies provide VoIP services – these are often called net phone service providers or VoIP service providers. Some well-known ones are Skype, Vonage and BT Broadband Softphone. If you use a voice telephone (perhaps one that has extra amplification or that is hearing aid compatible), you should be able to use VoIP as long as you have a broadband internet connection and the right equipment. For more information see page 8.

Skype

You can download the free Skype software from their website, and follow the instructions to install the program on your computer. Skype will ask you to create your own unique username and a password. Other Skype users can then contact you with this username.

Once the Skype softphone is on your computer, it will make your computer work like a telephone. The software phone will appear on the computer screen. You can make free calls to other Skype users (known as Skype-to-Skype calls) and Skype users can call you for free too.

You can also make calls from Skype on your computer to landline (BT) numbers and mobile phones, but you will need to buy credit on the optional 'Skype out' service first. The Skype website has more details on how you can do this. If you want to receive incoming calls from BT landline numbers or from mobile phones, you can do this through an optional service. Skype also offer an optional voicemail service. The message is forwarded to your nominated email address and can be played back on your computer or laptop through its loudspeaker.

There are a number of products you can use with Skype such as headsets and handsets that look similar to a telephone (look out for the blue Skype-approved logo). These have a USB connection that plugs into the USB socket on most modern computers and laptops. Besides Skype, there are a number of other VoIP services that work in a similar way (see page 8).

It is also possible to use these services with a webcam, so you can see the person you are speaking to (as long as they also have a webcam and use the same service). However, the quality may not be good enough for lipreading or signing. But webcams are not expensive and may be built into your computer, so it may be worth experimenting. If you are looking to buy one to use with Skype, look out

for one that is 'Skype approved'. Not all VoIP services have this feature so check first if it is important to you.

If you find while using Skype that you have difficulty hearing a call, Skype also has an 'instant text messaging' feature, which works in a similar way to a textphone. This can be used as a back-up but only on Skype-to-Skype calls.

BT broadband softphone

The BT softphone works in a similar way to Skype. You need to download the BT softphone from their website and install it on your computer. Calls to other BT softphone users are free but calls from a BT softphone to landline and mobile phones are not. You will need to sign up to the pay-as-you-go option if you want to make landline and mobile phone calls.

What equipment do I need to make internet calls?

You need something to speak into (just like you would with a normal phone), so that the caller at the other end can hear you, and you can hear them. The equipment you use will depend on your computer sockets.

USB sockets

The best option is to use a USB handset (also called a USB telephone), many of which have 'echo cancellation' to improve the call quality. USB handsets plug into the computer's USB socket. Most modern laptops have two USB sockets, whereas desktop computers usually have four or more. Older computers have USB 1.1, newer computers have USB 2.1, which is a faster connection and tends to work better with VoIP.

An alternative way to use Skype and other VoIP services is to use a VoIP USB adapter. These allow you to use any ordinary telephone, including hearing aid compatible models and those that have amplification. A VoIP adapter plugs into the computer's USB socket and has a BT-type socket so that any phone can plug into it.

Audio sockets

If you do not have a USB socket, you can use a headset (headphones with a microphone to allow two-way conversation) that plugs into the computer's audio sockets. However, this may not be ideal and the call quality might be quite poor because you may hear your own voice 'echo'.

Can I make internet calls without using a computer?

Vonage is a different type of VoIP service that doesn't need a computer. Instead, Vonage offers a monthly subscription service that includes the cost of a special adapter (also known as a router or VoIP router). Any phone can be plugged into the adapter, including hearing aid compatible models and phones with extra amplification. The adapter is connected to your broadband (Ethernet) modem.

To make and receive calls, you use the phone in the same way as you would when using a landline. For example, when you pick up the receiver, you will hear a dial tone.

With Vonage, you can make free calls to any landline number in the UK and Ireland at any time for a set price per month. International and mobile calls costs extra. It is basically a cheap second telephone line with its own number.

VoIP safety note: With most VoIP service providers, including Skype, **it is not possible to make emergency calls**. Emergency calls are possible with Vonage but not when there is a power cut or when the broadband internet connection is disconnected or disrupted.

Where can I get further information?

If you want to find out more, you may find the following factsheets useful:

- **Video communications**
- **Mobile phones**

Skype

www.skype.co.uk

BT Broadband Softphone

www.bt.com/broadbandtalk

Vonage

www.vonage.com

Where can I buy products that may help?

We sell a range of equipment for people with hearing loss and tinnitus. Visit our online shop or you can request a copy of the *Solutions* catalogue by contacting us directly.

1 Haddonbrook Business Centre, Orton Southgate, Peterborough PE2 6YX

Telephone 01733 361199

Textphone 01733 238020

Fax 01733 361161

solutions@hearingloss.org.uk

www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/shop

Further information from Action on Hearing Loss

Our helpline offers a wide range of information on many aspects of hearing loss. You can contact us for further copies of this factsheet and our full range of factsheets and leaflets – see the cover page for contact details.

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