

Buying hearing aids online Policy statement

Our position

Action on Hearing Loss is supportive of patient choice, and we recognise that the process of getting hearing aids can vary. However, the process should always involve a full hearing assessment from a qualified professional, who can prescribe and ensure hearing aids are fitted correctly for the individual's hearing loss and needs.

High quality digital hearing aids are provided free of charge on long term loan to NHS patients, following a referral from a GP. They are also available to buy through private providers following a hearing assessment. Individuals should not need to buy hearing aids online, and such hearing aids may be ineffective, harmful or stolen.

Introduction

This policy statement outlines the main issues for people with hearing loss. It also includes our stand on the issues¹.

We use the term 'people with hearing loss' to refer to people who are deaf, deafened and hard of hearing throughout.

Background

Hearing aids are available from the NHS and private providers, but some hearing aids are being sold online.

Around 200 NHS audiology departments in the UK provide hearing aids free of charge on long term loan to NHS patients, following a referral from a GP. Many audiology departments are based in hospitals, although some are in community settings or on the high street where the NHS-funded service is contracted to private providers. In some areas in England, where patient choice has been extended to Any Qualified Provider (AQP), people have a choice of different NHS adult hearing services provided by the voluntary, public and private sectors.

Following hearing aid modernisation programmes in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, all NHS providers are equipped to offer digital hearing aids. NHS audiology services in England and Scotland must meet an 18 week waiting time target, and in Wales waiting times must be a maximum of 14 weeks. In reality most people are seen much more quickly than these targets.

Private hearing aid dispensers can assess a hearing loss and supply digital hearing aids.

¹ Please note that, like many policy documents, this statement reflects the issues relevant at the time of writing. Over time this may be subject to change, such as new legislation, and we may review and amend the document.

A GP referral is not necessary to visit a private hearing aid dispenser. However anyone with more complex problems such as tinnitus, balance or infection should be referred back to the NHS. There are almost 1,600 qualified hearing aid dispensers in the UK, including several national companies. Private dispensers can generally offer an appointment within a week.

A full hearing assessment from a public or private provider will determine the degree, type and configuration of hearing loss. This is necessary to prescribe the most suitable form of treatment – which may be a specific type of hearing aid or it may be other types of intervention, from support services to surgery. There is a risk that a significant health disorder could be missed if the individual does not seek help for their hearing loss from a qualified medical professional.

The NHS and private providers can supply modern, digital hearing aids that are correct and fitted for the individual after assessment. Hearing aids bought without assessment may be inappropriate for the type of hearing loss being experienced - these would then not be effective and would represent a waste of money. There is no guarantee of the quality or source of hearing aids bought online, some may have been used before and some may even be stolen. After an individual has stopped using them, NHS hearing aids remain the property of the NHS service where they were issued, and they must be returned.

If a hearing aid bought online is not the correct type or is not set correctly, there is a risk that it could harm an individual's hearing, for example through excessive amplification. Any such damage would be irreversible.

For advice on getting either from the NHS or buying privately please see our factsheets on [Everything you need to know about hearing aids](#) and [Getting hearing aids](#).

Recommendations

- We recommend that individuals consult a qualified audiologist or hearing aid dispenser for a full hearing assessment before having hearing aids issued.
- Hearing aids bought without assessment may be inappropriate, ineffective, stolen and they may cause irreversible damage to a person's hearing.
- We strongly recommend that hearing aids are not bought online or from any other source where an assessment has not been carried out by a qualified professional.

Action on hearing loss is neutral on whether people use public or private hearing services – see our [policy statement](#). We are working to improve standards across public and private hearing services, and provide accessible information to allow people to choose a provider.

Our consumer feedback website [Locate and Rate](#) can help people find and review NHS and private hearing services.

Our factsheets on [Everything you need to know about hearing aids](#) and [Getting hearing aids](#), which covers the NHS and private provision, are available on our website to support people in making an informed choice of hearing service provider.