

Patient Experience Hints & Tips

Audiology – Getting Hearing Aids (1)

Although I'd had hearing aids for 4 or 5 years, I asked to be referred back to audiology as I felt my hearing had deteriorated further. I seem to have age-related hearing loss rather earlier than many, but then there are hearing problems on both sides of my family.

Audiology appointments are really nothing to worry about. The tests are quicker, and no more invasive, than a sight test.

Appointment 1 – Hearing Test

After a wait of several weeks I was given a one-hour appointment with the Ealing Hospital-based audiology service – but this first appointment was at Jubilee Gardens Health Centre in Southall.

The appointment itself was friendly and thorough. I was given a full hearing test. This takes no more than 10 minutes and involves wearing headphones, listening for beeps, and pressing a button when you hear the beep. As the beeps vary in both pitch and volume that allows the specialist's computer to work out the hearing profile for both your ears.

Unfortunately they hadn't got my records from the previous supplier, so were unable to tell me if my hearing actually had deteriorated, but agreed I should have new hearing aids.

We discussed my general lifestyle – work, social, home – to determine the best aids for me to have. Hearing aids these days are very small, very light and run on really tiny batteries (which the NHS supply free). The NHS generally only provides hearing aids which fit behind the ear with a small tube delivering sound to the ear canal. I was shown three models of hearing aid, all made by Oticon, and we agreed the middle sized ones were what I needed. I would have preferred a model which sits very unobtrusively right in the ear canal (which is what I had before), but the NHS no longer provide these, and they do seem to give a less good experience – and unlike the "behind the ear" type the volume is not easily adjustable.

An second appointment was made for me to visit Ealing Hospital a few weeks later to have the new hearing aids fitted.

Appointment 2 – Hearing Aid Fitting

This was also an hour, as it involves setting up and tuning the hearing aids for me. I took my wife along for amusement but also so she has a clue how the aids work if ever she needs to help me.

During the appointment, I was shown the new hearing aids and it was explained how to fit them and how to keep them clean. They were fitted to me, programmed by computer for my hearing profile, and the sound adjusted. This included the strange experience of listening to some spoken, recorded, speech which is composed of words from many different languages – none of us could work out more than an odd word, and that's the idea as it makes you listen more carefully.

I was advised that I should wear the hearing aids as much as possible to get used to them. The sound quality is slightly different, and you'll hear things you were missing, so the brain has to adjust slightly.

During both appointments I was given plenty of chance to ask any questions I wanted. If there is anything you don't understand then do ask; the specialists will be only too happy to explain.

I was made a appointment for a check-up after six weeks. Thereafter you should have a check-up, and the hearing aids serviced, every six months, but it is up to you to book this – the NHS will not schedule it automatically for you.

Following this second appointment, I found the new hearing aids slightly irritating to wear, and over a few days realised the volume control on one was not working properly. As instructed I phoned the Audiology Department and was given an early morning appointment a few days later for the aids to be checked. It turned out that one of the aids was defective, and in the process the "domes" which fit in the ear canal were swapped for a smaller size – these were slightly more comfortable.

Appointment 3 – 6 Week Check-up

About 6 weeks later I had the check-up appointment. This is largely routine to ensure you are happy with the hearing aids, they are working correctly, and address any concerns.

At this appointment we discussed domes, again. The ones I had were still not very comfortable and it turned out that there was a different design, made of softer silicone. These are very much more comfortable, although they are more inclined to whistle. Having experimented I've stuck with these softer domes as they give a more natural sound quality as well as being much more comfortable. So it is worth knowing that there are different sizes and types of domes available and getting the right one for you can make a huge difference to both comfort and sound quality.

Audiology – Getting Hearing Aids (2)

Hearing loss is something which creeps up on one without noticing. In my case it appeared to be slow and happened at the start of Covid, and as I was not out and about enjoying coffee mornings with friends, I did not notice it earlier.

I had recently bought a new TV and was bemoaning that the sound was not as good as older models, not realising it was me and not the TV.

I met three friends for lunch a few months ago in a busy restaurant so there was a fair bit of noise surrounding us. I had heard little so decided I had a problem and must do something about it.

I got in touch with my GP, and said I would prefer to be seen at Specsavers; this was organised and I had an appointment in Harrow soon after.

I was very impressed with the audiologist and after an hour of testing, I emerged with a pair of hearing aids, spare batteries, and a card which I must produce whenever I need new batteries. This superb treatment was all free because I had a doctor's letter stating my ears needed to be examined.

The dubious bonus was that the audiologist noticed a discrepancy in my right ear and she wrote to my GP for an ENT referral. I will be seen towards the end of this year at the hospital.

Life has not been dull since receiving the hearing aids. They worked well for a few days and then stopped working. Luckily I had an appointment to have ear wax removed by the same audiologist,

having applied drops to soften the wax many days before. It turned out tubes were blocked with a minute particle of wax.

The aids are small and finicky and I have an eyesight problem called Macular Degeneration. One eye's central vision is almost non-existent so I was having mega problems dealing with the hearing aids. The audiologist competently changed the tubes and showed me the opening to help keep the batteries charged when not in use. They worked perfectly.

A few days later each battery played a tune which meant they had died. Because of my sight problems changing the batteries was a nightmare. I tried to change one and managed to wedge a new battery into a space it did not fit. You are supposed to have an appointment at Specsavers but the manager felt sorry for me and corrected the hearing aid and fitted a new battery. He also did my other hearing aid so everything was back to normal again.

Although everything had been explained to me, there was a lot of information and I did not realise at the time that my eyesight had failed me. So, if going for a hearing test and you have sight problems, perhaps take a friend who will at least be able to see what to do!

Hearing aids are not cheap if bought privately. I have friends who have gone the private route and paid from £1K to £3.5K and the only difference between the £3.5K and my NHS ones is that the expensive ones are rechargeable so do not require replaceable batteries.

However you must have a doctor's letter to go the NHS route. It is well worth it because then the hearing aids are supplied free as are batteries and other spare parts; the cost would soon mount up.

Because I cannot read the right or left symbols on my aids, I bought coloured stickers for the boxes, red for the right and green for left.

You are advised to apply ear drops daily for at least a week before visiting an audiologist. Again, if you are sight impaired ask a friend to accompany you to audiology appointments as the hearing aids are small and can be fiddly.

My hearing aids can be a nuisance because I wear glasses and a mask when I am out. My glasses fog up and the hearing aids can pop out very easily. It may be easier, and safer, if wearing a mask, to have one which loops round the back of the head rather than behind the ears – cheap adapters for ear-loops are easily available.

Specsavers appeared to have cornered the market and I am fortunate to have such a competent audiologist.