Although it’s easy to take good hearing for granted, you probably know what it’s like to have ‘blocked’ ears during a bad cold - everything sounds muffled and you may have to ask people to repeat things. Fortunately, most people’s hearing returns to normal after their cold.

However, hearing does tend to deteriorate naturally as you grow older, although this is not usually noticeable until you are in your 60s or 70s. More than half of people over the age of 65 have a hearing loss, and usually the problem is due to the ageing process. Perhaps you have friends who are hard of hearing, and you may wonder if you are still hearing quite as well as you used to.

Here's a checklist to help you decide. If you answer ‘YES’ to any of the following questions, you may have acquired a hearing loss.

- Do you have to turn up the television or radio more than you used to, or does your family complain that the sound is too loud?
- Do you sometimes wish people would speak clearly, and stop mumbling?
- Do you ever miss your name being called, for example, at the doctor’s surgery?
- Do you sometimes misunderstand what people say to you?
- Do you find yourself asking people to repeat things?
- Do you find it difficult to hear at social gatherings, in places of worship, or when there is some background noise?
- Do you ever have difficulty hearing the doorbell or telephone?
What to do if you think you have a hearing loss

Visit your GP and explain your concern about your hearing. There could be many different reasons why you aren’t hearing as well as you used to, so your doctor will need to examine your ears and ask you a few questions to find out what the problem is.

For example, you may have a lot of wax in your ears which can be removed, or you may have an infection which can be treated. However, if your GP can find no obvious cause for your hearing loss, he or she will refer you to an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist. If your hearing loss is simply due to your age, the specialist will explain that there is no ‘cure’, and will probably offer you a hearing aid. Do try one - it's likely to be very helpful.

What does a hearing aid do?

A hearing aid is designed to amplify sounds (that is, make them louder) so that they are loud enough, but not uncomfortably loud. The amount of amplification you need depends on the type and degree of hearing loss you have. Hearing aids will amplify all everyday sounds, but are particularly designed to cope with the sounds that make up speech.

Sounds are made up of different pitches or 'frequencies'. A hearing aid amplifies these different pitches by different amounts, because when you have a hearing loss, you usually hear some frequencies more easily than others. Older people usually find the high frequencies more difficult to hear. So you might have problems hearing what children, with their high-pitched voices, are saying, while you can hear men whose voices are low in pitch. You may often be able to hear the sound of speech, but not the actual words.

There is a wide range of hearing aids to cater for all needs. Hearing aids are available either through the National Health Service (NHS), or commercially.
Different types of hearing aid

There are a number of different types of hearing aid to choose from, although not all will necessarily be suitable for you.

**Behind-the-ear aid**

This type of aid is available both through the NHS and commercially. It is worn with an individually made earmould, which not only feeds sounds through into the ear but also keeps the actual hearing aid in place. There are different models to suit nearly all types and degrees of hearing loss.

**In-the-ear aid**

Some people find this type of aid more discreet and appealing, since it fits right into the ear, rather than behind the ear. These aids are individually moulded to fit your own ear.

This type of aid is not usually suitable if you are profoundly deaf (that is, if you have a severe hearing loss).

**Body-worn aid**

Although this type of aid is still available both through the NHS and commercially, it is less commonly used than the behind-the-ear and in-the-ear aids. It comes in the form of a small unit worn on the chest, with a lead connecting the unit to an earphone and earmould. It’s more cumbersome than other types of aid but, because of its size, it is easier to operate and can provide higher levels of amplification.
How much help will a hearing aid give me?

A hearing aid will not restore your hearing to normal, or ‘cure’ your deafness. It is simply an ‘aid to hearing’.

When you use a hearing aid for the first time, everyday sounds may seem quite loud. It could take a couple of months to get used to hearing sounds in a new way. If you have any problems during this initial period, you should always return to the person who supplied you with the aid, for further advice.

You will probably find that your hearing aid is more helpful in some circumstances than others. You will need to experiment. Remember that hearing aids are most useful in quiet surroundings, when you are talking to only one or two people at a time. Background noise, such as music or other people talking, will tend to interfere with what you are trying to hear.

Despite this, your hearing aid can still be helpful in busy, noisy places. Loop systems, often fitted in public places such as theatres and railway ticket offices, can help you to receive clearer sound through your hearing aid, without picking up unwanted background noise. A special sign, shown here, lets you know when a loop system is installed. All public phones are also fitted with a loop.

However, you can only use a loop if you are able to switch your hearing aid to a special ‘T’ setting. All NHS aids have this setting, but some commercial aids do not. Remember to check this if you are buying an aid.
How to get a hearing aid

There are two ways of obtaining a hearing aid. You can get one free through the NHS or you can buy a hearing aid through a commercial hearing aid dispenser. You may find it helpful to read through the rest of this leaflet before deciding which route to take.

The NHS has a range of around 19 hearing aids, mostly of the behind-the-ear type. The NHS range is bought from the commercial manufacturers and changes from time to time, if the Department of Health feels that new models are needed. Although the current NHS range can cater for most types of hearing loss, many more models are available commercially, and for some types of deafness only a commercial aid will provide adequate benefit. In special circumstances, your consultant may prescribe a hearing aid for you which is not normally available on the NHS.

Obtaining an NHS hearing aid

Ask your GP to refer you to an ENT specialist at your local hospital, or to the local hearing aid clinic. Arrangements differ slightly from one area to another, and waiting times also vary. Most GPs will be happy to refer you, once they have examined your ears and checked that they can’t offer treatment. However, if your GP is reluctant, you may have to ask another GP at the surgery for a referral.

It is a good idea to make a special visit to your GP to discuss your hearing loss, rather than raising it at the end of a consultation about some other health problem, which your doctor may see as more important. After all, your hearing is very valuable to you!

At the ENT department, the consultant will examine your ears and arrange for your hearing to be tested by an audiologist at the hearing aid clinic. If the tests suggest that a hearing aid may help you, an impression of your ear will be taken so that an earmould can be made to fit your ear.
Once the earmould is ready you will be fitted with the hearing aid. The hearing aid, batteries, repairs and servicing will all be provided free of charge. Go back to the hearing aid department if you have any problems using your aid. They may be able to adjust the aid or change it for a different model.

Some hospitals may also sell hearing aids, but even if you do buy one, you still have a right to an NHS aid. Most people find NHS aids very helpful and it is often a good idea to try a free NHS aid and see if it suits you, before thinking about buying one.

**Buying a hearing aid**

Hearing aids are sold to the public by hearing aid dispensers, not by the manufacturers. Although you do not need to be referred to a dispenser by your GP, it is a good idea to see your GP first, as dispensers are unlikely to be medically trained. If you see your GP first, then any medical problem with your ears can be picked up.

All dispensers must be registered with the **Hearing Aid Council (HAC)** and have to follow the HAC Code of Practice. However, services do vary, so you need to be careful in your choice of dispenser. If you do have any problems with an aid you have purchased privately, first of all talk to the dispenser who sold you the aid. If you are still unhappy you might want to contact the Hearing Aid Council about your concerns.

If you decide to buy an aid, the following points may be of help.

- **Do** use a dispenser who has been recommended by a friend.
- **Do** use a dispenser who is based locally.
- **Do** take a friend or relative who has good hearing with you.
- **Do** make sure that you can use the aid for a trial period (preferably 30 days).