

Using mobiles and smartphones when you have hearing loss

You'll find this factsheet useful if you have hearing loss and are looking to buy a mobile or smartphone that works well with your hearing aids. We explain how some phones are more compatible with hearing aids than others, describe other useful accessibility features, and give you tips on what to check before you buy.

Contents

- What's the difference between a standard mobile and a smartphone? **2**
- What should I look for when buying a mobile or smartphone? **3**
- How do I know if a phone is compatible with my hearing aids? **3**
- What else should I look for? **5**
- What else can smartphones do for me? **7**
- Where can I get more information about mobiles and smartphones? **8**

i If you'd like this factsheet in Braille, large print or audio, please contact our Information Line - see last page for contact details.



What's the difference between a standard mobile and a smartphone?

When mobile phones first became popular in the late 1990s, they allowed you to make phone calls, exchange text messages, play a few simple games, and not much else. Since then, technology has moved fast, and the 'smartphone' is the most popular type of mobile available today. It's 'smart' because as well as offering the phone features of a standard mobile, it has:

- the ability to connect to the internet, so you can browse the internet and download many useful software applications called 'apps' ([see page 7](#))
- a touchscreen (usually)
- a high-resolution camera and video recorder
- a voice recorder
- a music player
- a whole range of other useful features.

Standard mobiles are still available for those who prefer a simpler phone. And some phones look and feel like a standard mobile but have some of the features of a smartphone, such as the ability to connect to the internet.

You can also find phones designed for those who struggle to use regular phones, including people with hearing loss, sight loss or memory loss, and those who have trouble with small buttons. With so much choice available, you should be able to find a phone that's right for you.

Finding the right price plan

To make sure you get good value for money when choosing a contract or 'pay as you go' deal, think about how many minutes and texts, and how much data (for internet services), you're likely to use each month. Ask for advice in a mobile phone shop if you're unsure.

- **Pay as you go** – you simply buy a phone and then top up your credit for minutes, texts and data when you run out. There's no contract. This is a good option if you don't use your phone much.
- **Pay-monthly** – you pay a set amount of money each month for a phone that has a standard allowance of minutes, texts and data. It's usually a 24-month contract, but you can get 18-month and 12-month deals. You can usually spread the cost of the phone over the length of the contract, but sometimes there's a one-off fee at the start.
- **SIM-card only** – a good idea if you're happy with your phone but want to change your phone network or contract. These deals are usually much cheaper than standard pay monthly deals, as you're not paying off the cost of a phone each month.

There are websites you can use to compare the different contracts and deals available, including:

- Uswitch: [uswitch.com/mobiles](https://www.uswitch.com/mobiles)
- MoneySuperMarket: [moneysupermarket.com/mobile-phones](https://www.moneysupermarket.com/mobile-phones)

What should I look for when buying a mobile or smartphone?

It's important that you find a phone that's easy to use and works well with your hearing aids, so you can hear the person you're speaking to clearly. It's worth visiting a high-street shop even if you want to buy the phone online, so you can try out different phones with your hearing aids and ask the retailer questions.

When looking at different phones, try to find out:

- Is the phone compatible with your hearing aids? Can you hear the caller's voice without any interference (usually a buzzing sound)?
- Are the volume and sound quality good enough when you're on a call?
- How easy is the phone to use?
- Is there a suitable ringtone?
- Is there a speakerphone?
- Is the phone Bluetooth-compatible, so you can stream sound from your phone to your hearing aids? (You may need a streaming device for this.)
- What other features does the phone have that may be of use to you? For example, predictive texting and tactile feedback ([see page 6](#)).

We look at these features in more detail in the following pages.

How do I know if a phone is compatible with my hearing aids?

The best way to find out is to try it. But looking for phones described as 'hearing aid compatible' and checking how they're rated is a good place to start.

Hearing aid compatible phones

Most smartphones and many mobiles are described as 'hearing aid compatible'. This means they contain a small coil of wire, called a 'Telecoil', that creates a magnetic field that picks up sound and transfers it straight to hearing aids on the hearing loop setting (formerly called the 'T' setting).

Your audiologist may need to activate the loop setting on your hearing aids before you can use it – ask them if you're unsure. And on some smartphones, you may need to turn on a 'Hearing aids' setting to activate the Telecoil – guidance on how to do this will be in the smartphone's manual.

The benefit of switching your hearing aid to the loop setting when using the phone is that only the caller's voice will be amplified (made louder). This is because the microphone inside your hearing aid has been turned off. It may make the caller's voice clearer and easier to hear, especially when there's background noise. You'll still need to place the phone close to your hearing aid to hear the caller.

Some people, however, prefer to use their phone with their hearing aid on the normal setting, where the hearing aid's microphone picks up sound from the phone – see what works best for you.

Hearing aid compatibility ratings

Some 'hearing aid compatible' phones work with hearing aids better than others. Sometimes there can be radio interference, heard as buzzing or whistling, when you hold a phone close to your hearing aid. This is often caused by a poor-quality Telecoil or microphone in the phone. That's why it's useful to check a phone's hearing aid compatibility rating (otherwise known as 'M', 'T' ratings).

The M (microphone) rating refers to how well the phone will work with your hearing aids on the normal setting, and the T (Telecoil) rating refers to how well the phone will work with your hearing aids on the loop setting ([see page 3](#)).

The M, T ratings are ranked from 1 (poor), through 3 (good) to 4 (excellent). An 'M1, T1' or 'M2, T2' rating means that the phone produces a lot of interference, and possibly has a weak loop signal too, while an 'M4, T4' rating means the phone is excellent on both microphone and loop settings and has the best chance of being interference free.

In practice, it's the combination of phone and hearing aid that's important. Sometimes, you may have a phone with a good-quality microphone and loop (a 3 or 4 rating) and still experience interference. The more powerful your hearing aid, the more interference you will potentially get.

You're also likely to get more feedback if your hearing aid isn't fitted correctly. See the boxed information, below, for how you can try to reduce interference.

Some phone manufacturers don't give a hearing aid compatibility rating. This doesn't necessarily mean it won't work well with your hearing aids; it's just that they haven't chosen to adopt the M, T ratings scheme.

You can check and compare how accessible many smartphones and mobiles are for people with hearing loss, including the M, T ratings, on the website of the Global Accessibility Reporting Initiative (GARI), which helps consumers find the best phone for them.

The website is easy to use and lets you check and compare accessibility features (for hearing/speech, dexterity, vision and/or cognition) for different phones, tablets, mobile apps, connected wearables and smart TVs. Visit www.gari.info

Reducing interference

To reduce feedback when using a phone with your hearing aids, hold the phone 1 or 2 inches away from your hearing aid. You can also use assistive listening devices such as neckloops, ear hooks and Bluetooth streamers. These devices wirelessly connect your phone to your hearing aid, so you can listen hands-free. They also reduce the noise around you, making phone calls easier.



See our factsheet [Assistive listening devices to find out more.](#)

What else should I look for?

Good volume and sound quality

Volume and sound quality vary widely between phones, so if you're buying in a shop, ask if you can make a call on more than one phone so you can compare their performance.

You can adjust the volume on a phone to help you hear what someone is saying more easily. With some models, this means taking the phone away from your ear, adjusting the volume and then listening again, so you miss some of the conversation. If the volume controls are on the side of the phone, you'll be able to adjust the volume while speaking or listening. Many people find this feature very useful.

However, problems with hearing phone conversations are often more to do with the limited sound quality of phone calls in general, rather than volume, so you might find that increasing the volume doesn't help. For improved sound quality, you can make phone calls using a high-definition service provider such as Skype, where sound is sent over the internet rather than the traditional telecoms network. You can download the free Skype app to a smartphone.

 To find out more about making calls over the internet, see our factsheet *Communicating online*.

A phone that's easy to use

Although a smaller phone may be easier to carry, it will probably have a smaller display and controls, which may make it more difficult to use. You may find that some phones are just an awkward shape or difficult to grip. Good-sized keys and a large, clear screen make a phone easier to use. And some people prefer a phone with simple functions.

Try out different designs to see which type of phone suits you best and ask in the phone shop for a demonstration of how the phone works and its different functions. Smartphones typically (though not always) have a touchscreen. Instead of physical buttons, you touch the display keys and other icons on the phone's screen.

Here are some useful questions to ask yourself:

- Are the buttons or touchscreen keys easy to press?
- Can I use any other controls easily?
- Can I hold the mobile phone comfortably?
- Is it a suitable size and weight?
- Is the display screen large enough for me to read what's on it? If not, can I easily adjust the size of the text?

Some mobiles are designed to be more accessible for people with disabilities. These will be marketed as accessible phones with obvious features such as big buttons, a loud ringer and large screen options.

Suitable ringtones and alerts

All mobiles and smartphones have a range of ringtones to choose from and a ringer volume that you can adjust. These can be simple pre-set tones or personalised songs and sounds. You may find some ringtones easier to hear than others.

All new phones can be set to vibrate when you receive a call or text message. This is especially useful if you keep your phone in your pocket.

Some mobiles also have lights that come on or flash when you receive a call (you can turn this on in the 'Accessibility' settings folder). These work well, as long as you keep your phone in a visible place. You can also get alerting devices that let you know when your mobile is ringing. These will also have a range of alerting options such as vibrate, flashing light and loud sound alerts.

 For more information on devices to alert you, see our factsheet *Alerting devices*.

A good speakerphone

Most mobiles have a speakerphone, allowing you to use the phone hands-free (without holding it to your ear) and at high volume. Many people with hearing loss find this feature useful, but do be aware that because you are using a speaker, your calls won't be private and the volume can be very loud.

Mobile phones vary greatly in their speakerphone performance, and high speakerphone volume often comes at the

price of poor sound quality and noticeable sound distortion. So choose wisely, and, if in a shop, do try the speakerphone, if possible.

Bluetooth technology

Digital hearing aids can connect to Bluetooth-compatible mobiles and smartphones using wireless Bluetooth technology. This allows all sound from your device, including music and speech on phone calls, to be transmitted wirelessly directly into your hearing aids. While some hearing aids have this function built in, others require an external Bluetooth streamer to connect to a phone.

Smartphones will be Bluetooth-compatible, but standard mobiles may not be, so it's best to check this before you buy.

 To find out more, see our factsheet *Understanding wireless technology for hearing aids*.

Other useful features

Tactile feedback on controls

Tactile feedback is available on some mobile phones that have physical buttons - it means you can feel a definite 'click' when you press a key properly. If you are profoundly deaf, controls with good tactile feedback can be another useful feature. Smartphones have either a touchscreen display or buttons that light up on contact, or can be set to do so, to let you know you have selected the right function.

Some new smartphones recreate the tactile feedback effect by vibrating slightly when you touch a 'key' on the touchscreen.

Predictive texting

This can help you send text messages if you find it difficult to press small keys. It's when your phone 'guesses' which word you are trying to type, which can make texting easier and faster. Just make sure it's guessed correctly before you send the message! Phones with good-sized buttons and a large screen make text messaging easier.

What else can smartphones do for me?

As well as allowing you to send text, picture and video messages, smartphones enable you to communicate online quickly and easily through apps (software applications). For example, you can send messages using free apps such as WhatsApp, connect with friends on Facebook and Twitter, or make online voice or video calls using Skype.

The smartphone will have a dedicated 'app store' – for example, Google Play for phones that use the Android operating system and the App Store for iPhones – where you can browse and search for these apps.

Apps for people with hearing loss

You may find free instant-messaging apps such as WhatsApp useful, which allow you to send free text, picture and video messages over the internet. They're a helpful alternative to voice calls in a busy environment. And you may find video-calling apps like Skype helpful if you need to lipread or use British Sign Language.

You can also use the Next Generation Text (NGT) service. With the NGT Lite app installed on your smartphone, you can communicate with another person, either directly (if they also have the NGT Lite app) by typing and reading messages, or through a Relay Assistant. A Relay Assistant can type what the person you're on the phone to is saying, so you can read it on your phone screen, and speak your typed words to the other person (or vice versa). The cost of using NGT may or may not be a part of your price plan, so check with your service provider before using it. To find out more about the NGT service, visit ngts.org.uk



To find out more about apps, see our factsheet *Communicating online*.

Emergency SMS

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 for people with hearing loss or speech difficulties. For more information, go to emergencysms.org.uk

Where can I get more information on mobiles and smartphones?

Visit phone manufacturers' websites to find out about the latest hearing aid compatible mobiles and smartphones and visit comparison websites such as uswitch.com and moneysupermarket.com

You can also get information from reputable high-street retailers.

You may be interested in the other factsheets in our **Products and technology** range:

- *Home telephones*
- *Understanding wireless technology for hearing aids*
- *Enjoying TV*
- *Assistive listening devices*
- *Alerting devices*
- *Text relay services*
- *Communicating online*
- *Smoke alarms.*

You can order these from our Information Line ([see last page](#) for contact details) or download them from our website at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/how-we-help/information-and-resources/publications/products-and-technology/

You can also find lots of useful information on our website at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/live-well/products-and-technology/

Join our online forum

There are increasing numbers of products designed for people with hearing loss. What products couldn't you live without? Join the debate in our **Products and Equipment forum**: community.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/products-and-equipment/f/forum

Products to help

The Action on Hearing Loss online shop features the latest products and technology to help with hearing loss and tinnitus, including mobiles and smartphones, and our experienced Customer Services team is here to support you to choose the product that's right for you.



All proceeds from product sales go back into supporting Action on Hearing Loss.

Shop online at: actiononhearingloss.org.uk/shop

To order your free catalogue, or to find out which products could help you, look online or contact our Customer Services team:

Telephone: **03330 144 525**
 Textphone: **03330 144 530**
 Email: solutions@hearingloss.org.uk

Information you can trust

The Information Standard certifies us as producers of high-quality, evidence-based information. Our **Technology Research Manager, Jesal Vishnuram**, and **Product Technologist, Kevin Taylor**, reviewed and updated this factsheet, published September 2017.

Did you find this factsheet helpful?

We'd love to know what you think of this factsheet – please email us at reviewpanel@hearingloss.org.uk

If you'd like to join our Readers' Panel, to help us create new publications and improve existing ones, please let us know.

Further information from Action on Hearing Loss

Our expert information covers everything you need to know about:

- hearing loss and deafness
- tinnitus
- ear problems and treatments
- hearing aids and cochlear implants
- useful products and technology
- communication tactics and support
- benefits and grants
- your rights.

Visit our website actiononhearingloss.org.uk or call our Information Line ([see last page](#)) for information, support and publications. You can also find out about services in your area, our hearing research, and how you can get involved.

Please help us support others

We provide our leaflets, factsheets and Information Line service free of charge to anyone affected by deafness, tinnitus or hearing loss in the UK. We rely on the generosity of our supporters to help us do this. We would be very grateful if you would consider making a donation - of as little or as much as you can afford.

Please send a cheque, payable to Action on Hearing Loss, to:

Freepost RTLX-CZKX-BTTZ
Action on Hearing Loss
1-3 Highbury Station Road
London N1 1SE
(No stamp needed)

Donate online at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/donate
Or make a donation over the phone by credit or debit card:

 **0203 227 6182**

 **0203 227 6185**

Thank you.

Our purpose is to help people confronting deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss to live the life they choose. We enable them to take control of their lives and remove the barriers in their way.

To find out more about what we do and how you can support us, go to actiononhearingloss.org.uk

Action on Hearing Loss Information Line

Telephone **0808 808 0123**
Textphone **0808 808 9000**
SMS **0780 000 0360**
(standard text message rates apply)
Email **information@hearingloss.org.uk**

Join us

 Action on Hearing Loss

 @ActionOnHearing

Publication date: September 2017. Review date: April 2018.

Action on Hearing Loss is the trading name of The Royal National Institute for Deaf People.
A registered charity in England and Wales (207720) and Scotland (SC038926). A1205/0917