

Workshops & Tips

**Pull Out
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Issue 699

14 pages of easy-to-follow workshops and expert tips

35 Use hearing aids with phones and Windows

40 Readers' Tips

PLUS

44 Phone & Tablet Tips

47 Make Office Better

38 Diagnose RAM problems

42 Browser Tips: Customise Chrome with new themes

46 Make Windows Better

48 In the Club: Collaborate using OneNote

HOW TO...

Use hearing aids with phones and Windows

by Nik Rawlinson

What you need: A smartphone or PC; hearing aid or earbuds **Time required:** Two hours



A third of the UK population is living with hearing loss. It's around half for those aged 55 or higher, and 80 per cent for the over-70s (see www.snipca.com/52872).

Impairments of this kind can have profound effects on sufferers. When it's hard to hear what's going on in noisy surroundings, it's also difficult to join in with conversations. You might miss out on important information, or choose not to socialise so often, which can ultimately lead to being cut off and feeling isolated.

It can also be hard work for those living with someone with hearing loss. Saying things several times over gets tiring, while being forced to share a TV

that has the volume turned up can be uncomfortable – and could even be putting the hearing of the non-impaired viewer at risk.

The most obvious solution would be for the hearing-impaired family member to use a hearing aid. These are available for free if an NHS hearing assessment, which is available via a GP referral, shows it would be helpful (www.snipca.com/52873).

If you qualify, repairs are also free, and you'll receive a free, ongoing supply of batteries. The kind of hearing aid funded by the NHS is usually a behind-the-ear (BTE) putty-coloured device, with a transparent tube feeding into the ear canal.

As an alternative, you could try to find out whether the tech you already own could do the job. Here, we'll explain how you can connect standard hearing aids directly to a smartphone or computer. Then we'll explore the features that are built into earbuds, computers and smartphones that mimic many of the features of a hearing aid.

Naturally, if you already own such a device, or you're intending to buy one, you could use it without having first had a hearing assessment, although we wouldn't advise it. An assessment may reveal a more serious underlying condition than hearing loss due to ageing.

1 Try hearing aids that work with smartphones

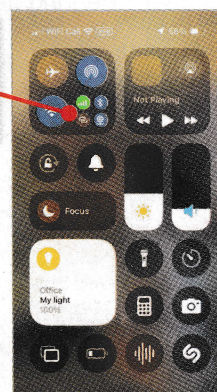
In the US, government regulator the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requires phones to be compatible with hearing aids. Although that requirement doesn't apply in the UK, the fact that phones are made for international markets means any smartphone you buy has a very good chance of being compatible with hearing aids.

If you're buying a new hearing aid, look for one that supports Bluetooth Low

Energy (LE) Audio, which will allow it to remain connected to a compatible phone for extended periods without drawing huge amounts of power.

If Bluetooth isn't yet turned on, you'll need to enable it on

On an iPhone, the Bluetooth control is in the small cluster of icons at the top left of the Activity Centre



your phone. On an iPhone X or later, swipe down from the battery icon at the top of the screen to open the Activity Centre – or, on iPhone SE, and iPhone 8 or earlier, swipe up from the bottom edge of the screen – then tap the small cluster of icons in the lower-right corner of the large group at the top left of the screen (see screenshot). This opens the

full set of connectivity controls. If the Bluetooth icon half way down the screen is white, tap it to turn on Bluetooth.

On Android, the process varies depending on the phone model and manufacturer, but typically you need to swipe down from the top of the screen and tap the Bluetooth button.

To connect a hearing aid to an iPhone or iPad, put it into pairing mode by following the instructions that were supplied with the device. Then, on your iPhone or iPad, open Settings and tap Accessibility followed by Hearing Devices. Your phone will start searching for your hearing aid. When its name appears on the screen, tap it, then tap Pair when the box appears.

There are two ways to achieve the same thing on Android. The best one for you depends on the kind of hearing aid you have, and the precise steps may vary depending on the version of Android you're running. Here, we'll walk through the steps for the version of Android found on Google-branded phones.

First, check whether your hearing aid is compatible with Google's 'Audio Streaming for Hearing Aids' (ASHA) standard. This allows direct streaming of high-quality audio from compatible Android devices to hearing aids without the need for intermediary devices like **streamers** or **neck loops**. Visit the website of your hearing aid's manufacturer, or read its manual, and look for terms like 'ASHA compatibility', 'Android streaming' or 'Direct audio streaming'.

Now open Settings on your Android device and, if your hearing aid is ASHA compatible, tap Accessibility, followed by 'Hearing aids' or 'Hearing devices'. Put your hearing aid in pairing mode and, on your phone, tap 'Pair new device' (see screenshot right) and wait for your hearing aid to appear on the screen. When it does, tap its name in the list of available devices.

If your hearing aid isn't compatible with ASHA, you can connect it as a regular Bluetooth device by opening Settings and tapping 'Connected devices'. Put the hearing aid into pairing mode, then tap 'Pair new device' on your phone. Tap the hearing aid's name when it

Tap 'Pair new device' on your Android device then wait for your hearing aid to be listed on your screen

How I cured my temporary deafness

I've had my hearing tested several times, but don't use hearing aids. Neither do I use earbuds for anything other than listening to music and podcasts, so in that respect I consider myself lucky. However, I did suffer temporary deafness several years ago, which was fixed by a professional syringing (not as unpleasant as it sounds). The blockage felt like it came on surprisingly quickly, but the difference, after treatment, was so dramatic that it was obvious in retrospect that my hearing had been degrading over time. If you're suffering something similar, have your ears checked by a professional before splashing out on assistive technologies.



Nik Rawlinson



How do you use hearing aids with your tech?

Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

appears on the screen.

Now that you've paired your hearing aid and your phone, you should be able to use its associated app to make changes. Again, the exact range of changes you can make depends on the make and model of your hearing aid, and the features within the app itself.

Common functions offered by hearing-aid apps include broadening or narrowing the area in which the hearing aid is picking up sounds, changing the tone of the audio being delivered, and adjusting the volume. The first of these can be particularly useful if you're using

your hearing aid in a crowded and noisy environment as it can reduce the amount of background audio captured so you can better participate in conversations with those directly around you.

Your audiologist should be able to direct you to the appropriate app for your hearing aid. However, some common options recommended by the NHS include BeMore for Danalogic hearing aids (www.snipca.com/52891) and the Oticon app for Oticon-branded hearing aids (www.snipca.com/52892), which is also available for Apple Watch. Also consider the Amplifon app for its own hearing aids (www.snipca.com/52893).

A paired set of hearing aids can also perform several useful functions without needing apps. These include streaming directly from your phone so you can use them to listen to music, podcasts or TV shows, or making phone calls, just like you would with a pair of Bluetooth earbuds.

Hearing devices

You can use hearing aids, cochlear implants and other amplification devices with your phone

+ Pair new device

Options

Hearing device shortcut
Off



Hearing aid compatibility
Improves compatibility with telecoils and reduces unwanted noise



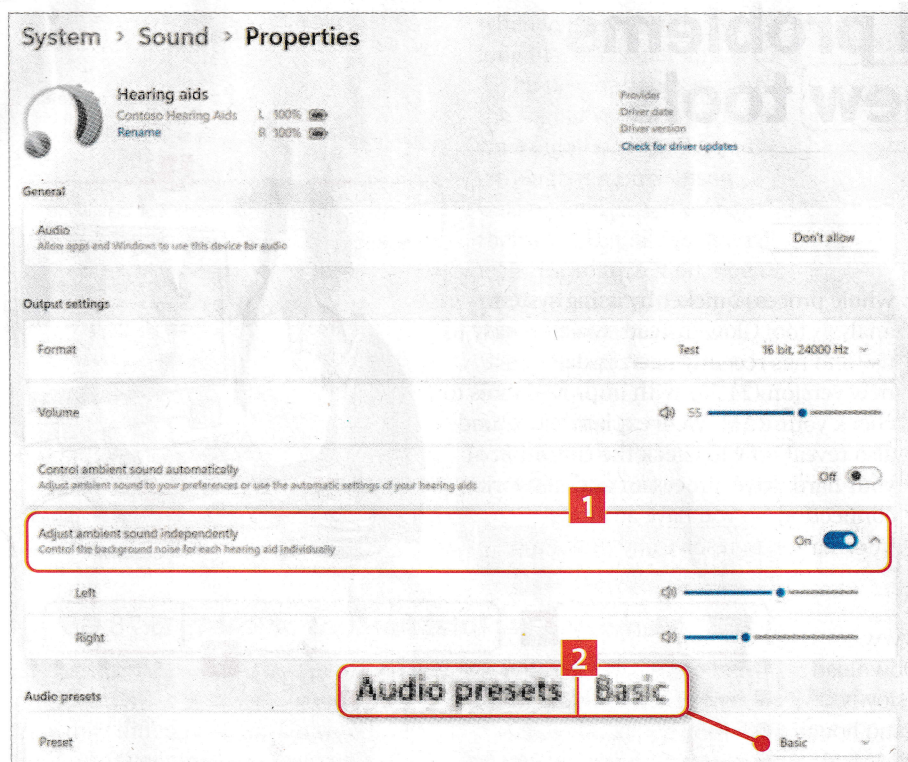
Make sure that your hearing device is turned on and ready to pair

2

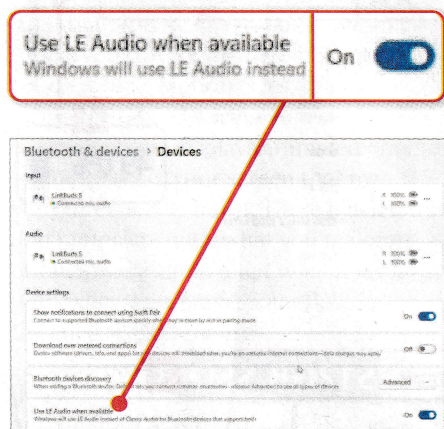
Pair Windows to Bluetooth earbuds

You might not be surprised to discover you can also pair Windows to Bluetooth-enabled hearing aids, so you can stream directly from your computer, as long as you're running Windows 11 (Microsoft specifies a Windows 11 device with Bluetooth LE support as the minimum system requirement for using Windows and hearing aids together).

Press Windows key+I to open Settings, then click 'Bluetooth & devices' on the left. Now click 'Devices' on the right, then scroll down to the 'Device settings' section. Here, look for the setting 'Use LE Audio when available' and turn it on (see



Windows 24H2 gives you more settings for controlling your hearing aids



Turn on 'Use LE Audio when available' in the Devices section of Windows Settings

screenshot above). If it's not there, your computer doesn't support Bluetooth LE.

To pair your hearing aid with Windows, click the Wi-Fi icon at the far-right of the Windows 11 taskbar, then click the right-pointing arrow ('>') to the right of the Bluetooth icon. Click 'Manage Bluetooth devices' on the menu that appears. Put your hearing aid into pairing mode and wait for Windows to detect them. When it does, click the hearing aid's name to pair it with your computer.

If you're running Windows 11 24H2, you can make adjustments to the way the operating system works with your hearing aids. To check which version of Windows you're running, open Settings

then click System followed by About. The version will be shown in the 'Windows specifications' section. If you're not running the latest release, launch Windows Update and check for any available downloads.

When you're running Windows 11 24H2 or later, click the taskbar's Wi-Fi icon, then the right-pointing arrow on the Bluetooth button, then 'Manage Bluetooth devices'. Click your previously paired hearing aid in the list of connected devices, then click Properties. You can now change how sensitive the hearing aid is to ambient noise (1 in our screenshot above), and change its audio presets (2). These will differ between different makes and models of hearing aid.

3 Use Apple AirPods Pro 2 You could be forgiven for thinking that a lot of the features we've discussed above – streaming audio, connecting directly to smartphones, and so on – sound just like the kind of things that you'd do with a regular set of earbuds. That's no coincidence. In many respects, hearing aids are just very specialised earbuds tailored to help with hearing loss.

So, it makes sense that high-end earbud manufacturers are starting to add features designed to tackle hearing loss. Apple's AirPods Pro 2 (pictured right), for

example, can now perform at-home hearing tests. They can also reduce very loud sounds while on the go to reduce the likelihood of damaging a user's hearing.

Perhaps most interesting, though, is that AirPods Pro 2 also have assistive technologies that can help users with hearing loss to hear better. Designed for users with mild to moderate hearing loss, the buds use the results of its hearing-test to build a personalised profile for their owner (see phone screen pictured below). These make dynamic adjustments to the sounds around them and feed these directly into their ears – much like a clinical hearing aid would do.

The idea is to make it easier for the wearer to interact with people around them in a more natural way. To take the hearing test and use the dynamic adjustment features, you'll need to have at least iOS 18.1 installed on your iPhone.

Having this data to hand also means the iPhone to which the AirPods Pro 2 are paired can apply similar adjustments to streamed media, including music, TV and phone calls without you having to tweak its settings at the beginning of a session.

At £229 (www.snipca.com/52900), AirPods Pro 2 are one of the more expensive options if you're shopping for earbuds, but when you consider their full set of features and compare them with the price of a clinical hearing aid, they represent good value for money.

The price of a hearing aid naturally depends on the manufacturer, range of features, and the severity of your hearing impairment, but if you don't qualify for a free hearing aid on the NHS, expect to pay around twice the price of a set of AirPods Pro 2 for a basic device, and several thousand pounds for a high-end option.

Apple's AirPods Pro 2 test your hearing to build an audio profile for you

