

Factsheet

Choosing disability equipment

Disability equipment can help to keep you independent at home and in the community, whether you need an adjustable bed, a scooter or just some helpful gadgets.

This factsheet explains some of the options, things to consider when buying your equipment, and help you might get to pay for it.



Call free on **0800 319 6789**

Visit **[independentage.org](https://www.independentage.org)**

About Independent Age

Whatever happens as we get older, we all want to remain independent and live life on our own terms. That's why, as well as offering regular friendly contact and a strong campaigning voice, Independent Age can provide you and your family with clear, free and impartial advice on the issues that matter: care and support, money and benefits, health and mobility.

A charity founded over 150 years ago, we're independent so you can be.

The information in this factsheet applies to England only.

If you're in Wales, contact Age Cymru
(0800 022 3444, ageuk.org.uk/cymru)
for information and advice.

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland
(0800 12 44 222, ageuk.org.uk/scotland).

In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI
(0808 808 7575, ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland).

In this factsheet, you'll find reference to our other free publications. You can order them by calling **0800 319 6789** or by visiting **independentage.org/publications**

Contents

1. What equipment is available to help me stay independent?	4
2. Small aids for daily living	7
3. Help to get around	8
4. Mobility scooters	10
5. Wheelchairs	13
6. Wheeled walking frames (rollators)	17
7. Help at home	19
8. Riser recliner chairs	20
9. Adjustable beds	23
10. Help with sight or hearing loss	25
11. Before you buy	29
12. General things to consider when you're buying	31
13. How to pay for your equipment	32
14. Buying second-hand – what to consider	34
15. I don't need my equipment any more. What should I do with it?	35
16. Making a complaint	36

1. What equipment is available to help me stay independent?

Aids and equipment can help you stay independent and safe both at home and in the community. You may need a mobility scooter, a riser recliner chair, or something much smaller, such as a gadget to open bottles and cans or a kettle tipper.

Working out what you need

If you think you could benefit from some equipment or other help at home, start by asking your local council's social services department for a free care needs assessment involving an occupational therapist. Their contact details will be in the local telephone directory or on the council's website ([gov.uk/find-local-council](https://www.gov.uk/find-local-council)).

An occupational therapist works with people who are ill, recovering from an illness, or have health problems or a disability. They'll use the assessment to identify what tasks you can do, what you have difficulty with and what you're unable to do. Then they will work out a plan with you to help you stay safe and independent, including what equipment you could use.

It's a good idea to prepare by jotting down anything you struggle with or feel unsafe doing over a few weeks, so you remember to mention them during your assessment. You should be in charge of the situation and the assessor will listen to your opinions and wishes. If you have good and bad days, explain this so the assessor knows how difficult things can be for you.

For advice on getting a care needs assessment, see our factsheet **[First steps in getting help with your care needs](#)**.



Good to know

Get an assessment even if you may be buying equipment privately. It's a good way to find out about different products and get expert advice from an occupational therapist on what would be best for you. They can also give you tips and show you how to carry out tasks without expensive equipment. This might save you time and money in the long run.

What help might I get?

After your care needs assessment, as a minimum you must be given a copy of your assessment and information about where to find the help you need.

If your needs are great enough, the council will have to meet them. In that case, you'll be given a separate financial assessment to work out whether you'll have to pay for any of the services the council arranges or provides. Our factsheet **Getting a financial assessment for care at home** has more information. If the council is paying for some or all of your care, they must develop a care support plan with you.

The assessment may suggest you could benefit from:

Home carers or a personal assistant

to help with personal care, such as getting in and out of bed, bathing or preparing meals. Find out more in our factsheet **Getting care services at home**.

Equipment or adaptations that cost less than £1,000 each

such as a bath seat, handrails, bed-raising blocks, a perching stool, grab rails or concrete ramps with rails. Your local council must provide these free of charge if you're assessed as needing them.

Home adaptations costing more than £1,000

for example, installing a stairlift, widening doorways to allow space for a wheelchair or converting your bathroom to a wet room. You may get help from your council to pay for this, for example, in the form of

a Disabled Facilities Grant. Our factsheet **Adapting your home to stay independent** has more information.

Telecare or telehealth

which is technology to help you live safely at home. It includes community alarms, sensors that can detect when you've left a tap running or left the gas on, medication dispensers with alerts to remind you to take your medication and ways to monitor your health at home. Ask your local council or GP to find out what is available in your area. See our factsheet **Technology to help you at home** to find out more.

2. Small aids for daily living

Small daily living aids can help you with specific things you find difficult, like gripping, lifting or turning things – for example:

- kettle tippers to help you fill or pour from a kettle
- adapted cutlery if you have a weaker grip or limited hand movement
- turners to help you use taps, turn keys or undo jars
- elastic shoe laces to convert lace-up shoes into slip-ons for people who struggle to tie their shoes
- mounted or long-reach nail clippers.

These aids can make a big difference when carrying out tasks that now seem difficult (if not impossible) without help. For example, if you find it difficult to reach or bend, a sock or stocking aid can help you get dressed. The Disabled Living Foundation has information on small aids and where to buy them ([0300 999 0004](tel:03009990004), dlf.org.uk and asksara.dlf.org.uk).

If you are living with sight loss, the Thomas Pocklington Trust has a guide to useful products to help you around the home ([020 8995 0880](tel:02089950880), pocklington-trust.org.uk/assistive-and-inclusive-home-technology-a-guide-for-people-with-sight-loss). The Royal National Institute of Blind People also has advice on adapting your home if you have sight loss ([0303 123 9999](tel:03031239999), rnib.org.uk/information-everyday-living-home-and-leisure/adapting-your-home).



Good to know

If you need adaptations to your home, you could apply for a Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG). This covers things like adding stair rails or ramps, widening doorways and adding lighting to make it easier to see inside your home. For more information on DFGs, see our factsheet [Adapting your home to stay independent](#).

3. Help to get around

If you have long-term mobility issues, there are various options that could help you to get around independently. Depending on your needs, mobility scooters, wheelchairs or walking aids could be right for you. A wide range of equipment is available, so look into the different options carefully – the following chapters explore a few of them.

Getting around the shops

Shopmobility is a scheme that hires out mobility aids to people who need help accessing city centres and shopping areas. Each scheme offers a range of equipment for hire, including scooters and electric wheelchairs, as well as training on how to use it safely. Anyone with limited mobility can become a member – you don't have to be registered disabled or receive a disability benefit. There is usually a small fee to join and hire costs are low or even free. To find a Shopmobility scheme near you, call **01933 229644** or visit [nfsuk.org](https://www.nfsuk.org).

Other ways to get around

Some of the following may be available in your local area:

- pre-bookable accessible transport schemes, such as Dial-a-Ride or community cars – contact your council or the Community Transport Association (**0161 351 1475**, [ctauk.org](https://www.ctauk.org)) to find out what's available
- a local Taxicard scheme for subsidised taxi fares – contact your council for more information ([gov.uk/find-local-council](https://www.gov.uk/find-local-council))
- your local Royal Voluntary Service may have a volunteer driving scheme to help you get out and about and engage in social activities (**0845 608 0122**, [royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk](https://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk)).

Flying

Airlines are required to make reasonable adjustments to help passengers with mobility needs. These can include helping you to get on and off the plane, access the toilet and operate your wheelchair if you aren't able to operate it yourself. The airline should provide you with any reasonable assistance as long as you tell them what you need at least 48 hours before the flight. The Equalities and Human Rights Commission has some advice on flying with mobility problems (**0808 800 0082**, equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/top-tips-disabled-and-less-mobile-air-passengers).

4. Mobility scooters

A mobility scooter can let you travel independently if you have mobility problems. Scooters are battery powered and come in many different models and sizes.

Is a scooter right for me?

A scooter can give you back your freedom and independence and help you feel part of your community again. However, they're not suitable for everyone. You'll need to be able to get on and off it by yourself. And while there isn't a legal requirement about your eyesight, the government recommends you only ride one if you can read a car's registration plate from 12.3 metres (40 feet) away.

It's your responsibility to make sure you can ride safely and you need to be familiar with the Highway Code ([gov.uk/guidance/the-highway-code](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/the-highway-code)). You'll also need somewhere safe and secure to store and charge your scooter.

If a mobility scooter isn't suitable for you, there may be other options. Talk to your occupational therapist or physiotherapist, if you have one.

Types of scooter

Scooters are divided into class 2 and class 3 vehicles.

- Class 2 scooters can only be used on pavements and have a top speed of 4mph.
- Class 3 scooters can be used on the road and the pavement. They tend to be larger, more robust and have safety features like mirrors, front and rear lights, and a horn. They have a top speed of 8mph but must be able to travel more slowly, at up to 4mph, on the pavement.

Think about what size and type of scooter you need. The smaller it is, the easier it will be to use indoors and store away. Smaller (class 2) scooters can be folded up or dismantled to fit in a car boot, so may be best if you're planning to take your scooter on trips and holidays.

Some smaller scooters can also be taken on public transport – contact local transport providers to find out more. If you want to travel longer distances, look for a larger (class 3) scooter. These need to be registered with the DVLA (**0300 790 6801**, [gov.uk/government/organisations/driver-and-vehicle-licensing-agency](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/driver-and-vehicle-licensing-agency)). This is free and you don't need a driving licence.

While most retailers will provide basic training on how to use your scooter, it's a good idea to have additional training to make sure you're using your scooter safely. Some local Mobility Centres offer training – check what's available in your area. You can find your nearest centre at Driving Mobility (**0800 559 3636**, drivingmobility.org.uk/find-a-centre).

You'll need to maintain your mobility scooter, especially the brakes, tyres and lights, and get it serviced regularly. Ask the provider if they offer a warranty or service contract. You may want to consider getting breakdown cover. You may also need accessories to keep you comfortable and safe, such as wing mirrors, padded arm rests or a bad-weather canopy. Bear all this in mind when thinking about the cost.

When travelling by plane, you should notify the airline as soon as possible if you plan to take a mobility scooter with you. Airlines have different policies around what equipment you can take with you. Check their policies before you book, because they may not permit certain scooters.

You won't be able to take it into the cabin with you, so make sure that they will provide you with enough support getting around the airport and the plane. Your scooter will be placed in the hold, so provide them with plenty of detail, such as weight, size and battery size. If you are flying to a European airport, you should not be charged, and your scooter should not be counted against your luggage allowance.

Paying for your scooter

If you receive certain disability benefits, you may be eligible to hire or buy a scooter through the Motability scheme – see chapter 13 for details. If you're not eligible for Motability, you can rent or buy privately – prices vary considerably, depending on the model. Some charities may provide funding. You could also consider buying second-hand.

While it's not a legal requirement to have insurance for your scooter, it's a good idea to take out a policy to cover any accidents, theft or damage.

5. Wheelchairs

If you need to use your mobility equipment for long periods of time or in your home, a wheelchair may be more suitable than a mobility scooter. Wheelchairs can be manual or electric. Start by discussing this with your doctor, consultant, occupational therapist or physiotherapist. If they think you would meet the criteria, they can refer you for an assessment for the local NHS wheelchair service.

Each local wheelchair service has its own criteria to decide who qualifies for help. The assessment will look at what sort of mobility equipment would be best for you and may suggest a mobility scooter or other type of equipment if this would be more suitable than a wheelchair. If you're eligible, you may be loaned a wheelchair or given a voucher towards the cost of one if you choose this option. You may also have access to a personal wheelchair budget, so you can choose the wheelchair you think will best meet your needs, within the budget set by the wheelchair service. The budget they set should take account of your particular mobility needs.

The personal wheelchair budget scheme is gradually replacing the wheelchair voucher scheme, to give people more choice and flexibility. This budget could be combined with a personal health budget or a personal budget for social care, if you have one. If you're not eligible for support from the wheelchair service, you'll have to hire or buy a suitable wheelchair privately.

Contact your local Clinical Commissioning Group to find out more about their eligibility criteria, what equipment they can fund and what funding schemes they have in place ([england.nhs.uk/resources/ccg-directory](https://www.england.nhs.uk/resources/ccg-directory/)).



Good to know

You may have to join a waiting list for an NHS wheelchair service assessment. In some areas, you may have to wait several weeks.

Is a manual wheelchair right for me?

Manual wheelchairs need to be pushed, by you or someone else. They're lighter, more manoeuvrable, more portable and cheaper than electric wheelchairs. They don't need charging and will generally require less maintenance. When folded, they're compact, so can be easily stored in your home or put into the boot of a car when you need to transport them.

A manual wheelchair could be right for you if, for example:

- you can push yourself or have someone who can push you
- you need a wheelchair for short-term use or don't need to use it for long each day
- you can't control an electric wheelchair.

Is an electric wheelchair right for me?

Electric wheelchairs don't need to be pushed. They are designed either for indoor use only or for both indoor and outdoor use. Wheelchairs for outdoor use tend to be more robust and have batteries that can cover a longer distance. However, their larger size may mean they cannot fit through all doorways and corridors. You also need to check if your house has space for battery recharging. You can get models with kerb-climbing abilities if you need this to get around your local area, and all-terrain wheelchairs that you can use in the countryside.

Like mobility scooters, outdoor wheelchairs come in two categories – class 2 and class 3 – depending on whether you want to use them on the road or pavement (see chapter 4). All electric wheelchairs are powered by a rechargeable battery, so you'll need a suitable place to store and charge yours.

Electric wheelchairs are usually controlled with a joystick and control panel on the arm rest, but there are alternatives if you can't use a hand controller. They come in a range of models with various accessories, including pressure relief cushions and head and side supports.

If you can't get in and out of the chair independently, there are aids and equipment to help you do this, such as transfer boards or hoists. Talk to your occupational therapist about what would be best for you. Electric wheelchairs are designed to take different weights, and can be custom made if you find traditional models don't suit you.

An electric wheelchair could be right for you if, for example:

- you find it hard to push yourself in a manual wheelchair
- you need to travel long distances in the chair
- you have room to store it and use it in your home, or can adapt your home to be able to use it there.

If you want to travel with your wheelchair, some models can be dismantled or folded up to fit in your car. Heavier models may need a ramp or hoist to get the wheelchair into the boot or on the roof. The Research Institute for Disabled Consumers produces a factsheet called **Getting a wheelchair into a car**, which has more information. Download it free from their website at ridc.org.uk/content/getting-wheelchair-car or phone them on **020 7427 2460** to order a printed copy (you'll need to pay for postage).

If you're travelling by plane, ask your airline what help they will provide at least 48 hours before you travel. You can't take your own wheelchair into the passenger cabin of a plane – it will be stored in the hold. Tell your airline, travel agent or tour operator if you're taking a battery-powered wheelchair.

Paying for an electric wheelchair

If you receive certain disability benefits, you may be eligible to hire or buy an electric wheelchair through the Motability Scheme – see chapter 13.

If you're not eligible for Motability, you can privately rent or buy your own electric wheelchair. Prices vary considerably depending on the model and any specialist features.

Check whether the price includes features such as the battery and charger. Ask about the cost of replacement batteries and maintenance, because this can be expensive.

Your wheelchair will need to be serviced regularly to stay in good working order. The manufacturer may offer a warranty, maintenance contract or insurance policy to cover the cost of servicing, engineer call-outs and replacing faulty parts. This cover may not include replacement batteries, so read the small print carefully to check what you may need to pay for.

6. Wheeled walking frames (rollators)

Walking frames can help you if you have balance problems or weak legs. They are available without wheels, but here we'll look at wheeled walkers, which can allow a more natural walking rhythm.

Walking frames are available with different numbers of wheels – usually two, three or four. Two-wheeled frames are designed for use in the home, whereas three- and four-wheeled frames tend to be larger and are designed more for outdoor use. Narrow frames are available for indoor use, which can be useful if you have a smaller property.

Three-wheeled frames are usually lighter and more manoeuvrable, but can be less stable and easier to tip than four-wheeled frames.

Three- and four-wheeled frames often have extra features, like baskets, trolleys or trays for carrying things, or seats if you need to rest occasionally.

Is a wheeled walking frame right for me?

A wheeled walking frame may be a good option if:

- you can walk as far as you need to, but need some support or help with balance
- you want to move faster or with a more natural motion than a non-wheeled walker will allow
- you want a frame you can use inside or outside
- you want a walking aid that can be folded for easy storage and transportation.

They may not be suitable if:

- you need to put a lot of weight on the frame
- you can't operate the brakes.



To do

If you're unsure what you need, get a care needs assessment from your local council before you buy, to check if they can provide anything and to make sure that the equipment is suitable for you – see chapter 1.

The Research Institute for Disabled Consumers produces a guide called **Stepping out**, which helps you decide what kind of mobility aid is right for you, and also includes information on how to choose a wheeled walking frame. Download it from ridc.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Guides/wheeled-walking-frames.pdf.

7. Help at home

A range of equipment is available to help you live at home independently by assisting you with tasks like standing and sitting, and sleeping comfortably.

The following chapters look at some of the larger pieces of equipment available: riser recliner chairs and adjustable beds. If you're looking for something different, the Disabled Living Foundation's website (livingmadeeasy.org.uk) lists many types of equipment to help you at home, from small gadgets to more substantial items.

If you can't find equipment that fits your needs, you might want to consider making adaptations to your house, such as fitting a downstairs bathroom. See our factsheet [Adapting your home to stay independent](#) for more information.

Another option may be moving to more accessible accommodation. This could be a bungalow, or sheltered or retirement accommodation. For more information, see our guide [Choosing where to live](#).

8. Riser recliner chairs

Riser recliner chairs are designed to help you sit down and stand up more easily, with a reclining action to make you more comfortable. Pressing a button makes the chair slowly rise up so you can stand safely. To sit, you position yourself on the raised seat and press the button to make the chair go down.

Most chairs are mains-powered, but some come with a manual lever. Electrical chairs have a battery back-up system in case of a power cut.

Riser recliner chairs come in varying sizes with different movement options. You can add accessories for additional comfort and safety, such as back rests and memory foam cushions. If you use a wheelchair, some riser recliner chairs have drop or removable armrests to help you transfer into them.



Good to know

Even if your riser recliner chair fully reclines, it isn't designed to replace a bed. Talk to an occupational therapist or physiotherapist about whether a chair-bed or specialist multi-adjustable bed would be more suitable for you if you plan to sleep in it overnight.

Is a riser recliner chair right for me?

Riser recliner chairs let you get your feet up or lie back for a rest. They make it easy to change your position, which can stop you getting uncomfortable.

You can get chairs with additional features to suit your needs – for example:

- a rising leg rest can help with swollen ankles or medical conditions that affect your legs
- pressure-relieving cushions can keep your joints mobile and prevent you getting pressure sores

- a 'tilt in space' action means the whole chair tips back, not just the back rest. This gives your lower back more support and doesn't rub the skin on your back as you move
- if there's a risk that small children or pets could get trapped in the mechanism as you lower the chair, look for one with a safety device to prevent this.

If you think you need special features, ask for an occupational therapy assessment from your local council's adult social services department to work out what you need.

Riser recliner chairs are larger and heavier than normal chairs and need enough space for you to fully recline and raise the leg rest. If you're short on space, a compact 'wall hugging' chair can be positioned closer to a wall.

Paying for a riser recliner chair

Prices vary, depending on whether you need special features. You can buy a ready-made riser recliner chair, but if you're very small or very large you may need one that's custom made, which is more expensive.

If you've had a care needs assessment (see chapter 1) that recommended that you need a riser recliner chair to stay independent at home, you may receive one from the council as a long-term loan, or you may qualify for funding to buy one.

If you're paying for the chair yourself, see chapter 13 to find out about possible sources of funding.

How to choose

Try out the chair before you buy it to make sure it's comfortable and easy to use, and that you can operate the controls properly. Be prepared to try the chair for at least an hour – bring a book or something to do! If the provider offers home visits, it may be easier to do it that way. See chapter 12 for a list of general questions to ask the provider.

You may be able to try one at your local Equipment Demonstration Centre – see chapter 11.



To do

The Research Institute for Disabled Consumers produces a guide called **Are you sitting comfortably? – a guide to riser recliner chairs**, which also looks at choosing a standard chair. Download it free from their website at ridc.org.uk/features-reviews/guides/home-adaptations/riser-recliner-chairs or phone them on **020 7427 2460** to order a printed copy (you'll need to pay for postage).

Other options

If a riser recliner chair isn't suitable, there may be other options. If you have an occupational therapist or physiotherapist, ask them for advice on standing and sitting in the right way. They may have simple tips that can help you.

Higher seats make it easier to sit down and stand up. You can buy a chair with a higher seat or raise the height of a chair by putting chair-raising blocks under the legs. Chairs with arms can help you push up and lower yourself with more control. High backs or contoured backs can help your posture. If you need to raise your legs, you can get a leg rest or footstool.

9. Adjustable beds

Adjustable beds (also called electric beds or profiling beds) can help you get in and out of bed and move into a more comfortable sleeping position. Basic models can raise and lower the upper body, while more complex beds can move into multiple positions. Most adjustable beds are mains-powered and controlled by a handset.

Is an adjustable bed right for me?

Adjustable beds can help with a range of health conditions, including arthritis, and respiratory and circulatory problems.

As with ordinary beds, adjustable beds are available in various sizes. They also come as 'dual double beds' – a double bed base with two separate mechanisms so each side moves independently. If you share a bed, this means your partner won't be disturbed by your movements and each of you can choose a comfortable sleeping position.

You can get additional features such as handrails and heat pads. Many models have a safety mechanism that will sense an obstruction and stop the bed moving – useful if you have pets or small children around.

Adjustable beds can be expensive, especially when you factor in the cost of a special mattress that can bend with the base of the bed. The bed will need to be connected to an electrical supply and won't work in a power cut unless you have battery back-up. Consider where you want to position the bed, as they can be bulky and heavy to move.

Where can I get an adjustable bed?

You can buy an adjustable bed from the high street or from specialist shops, which will usually have a wider range with more features. Check that the shop has the National Bed Federation mark of approval. Manufacturers belonging to this scheme have to meet certain standards and sign up to a code of practice.

If you have certain long-term health conditions, you may be given an adjustable bed on loan from the NHS or your council. If you're currently in hospital, speak to the discharge team about arranging a hospital bed

before you leave. If you're not in hospital, speak to your local council's adult social services team, GP or district nurse service about what may be available.

How to choose

Try out the bed before you buy it, to make sure it's comfortable and easy to use, and that you can operate the controls. Bed showrooms should have several models on display, so take your time and try several of them. Take someone with you for a second opinion. Companies can also visit you at home if you have problems getting to a showroom. See chapter 12 for a list of general questions to ask the provider.

Other options

If an adjustable bed isn't suitable, there may be other options.

Raising the height of your bed with bed-raisers can help you get in and out of bed. Back rests, inclinators (electric devices that raise part of a mattress) and mattress wedges can raise your upper body or legs while you rest.

If you have trouble turning, sitting up or moving, then it might be possible to fit grab handles or lifting poles (a pole with a strap and handle to help you pull yourself into position) to your bed.

If you need to be regularly turned in bed, turning mattresses can be used with a standard bed. If you have a carer, the assessor may have to give them training in how to use any equipment you get safely. Visit the Disabled Living Foundation's website [livingmadeeasy.org.uk](https://www.livingmadeeasy.org.uk) to find out more.

10. Help with sight or hearing loss

If you're living with sight or hearing loss, there's a wide range of products and equipment to help you stay independent.

Help with sight loss

There are many products available, including enhanced lighting, talking gadgets, and aids to help you keep time, or find and identify things. Some examples include:

- different types of magnifiers, from small handheld lenses to desktop video magnifiers
- kitchen equipment, such as special gloves, grips, handles and oven shelf guards, liquid level indicators and talking microwaves
- audio markers, tactile markers and raised bumps for labelling things like controls or objects in your cupboards
- colour and light detectors to help you distinguish different colours and intensity of light
- text-to-speech devices, such as DAISY players and USB players, screen readers and scanner reading machines
- canes and mobility aids.

You can get information and advice about the different types of equipment from the Royal National Institute of Blind People (**0303 123 9999**, rnib.org.uk) and the Thomas Pocklington Trust (**0208 995 0880**, pocklington-trust.org.uk).

Hearing aids and other devices

Hearing aids are available on the NHS for anyone who needs one. A hearing aid will only help if you have some hearing left, so don't put off getting one. Your GP can refer you to an audiologist who will recommend the best hearing aid for you. There are many different types but they either fit in or behind your ear. They are battery-operated and most are now digital, which means they can be quite accurately adjusted to your hearing loss. You can find more information on the different types of hearing aids at independentage.org/living-hearing-loss.

If you want to buy privately, shop around and don't be pressured into buying an expensive model when a cheaper one may suit you better. Smaller hearing aids can be fiddly if you have poor eyesight and dexterity. Some hearing aids can be used straightaway while others may need to be custom made.

NHS hearing aids come with free batteries and repairs, although you may be charged if it gets broken or lost and needs to be replaced. You'll need to check what's included if you buy privately. Action on Hearing Loss has a free hearing aid support service for people who use NHS hearing aids (**0808 808 0123**, actiononhearingloss.org.uk). They can also advise on other aids and, in some areas, they run equipment assessment services.

As well as hearing aids, you can get devices that alert you to things you can't hear, such as telephones, doorbells and alarms. You can also get equipment to help you follow and join in conversations or listen to music or television – for example, headphones, neckloops, TV listeners and room loops. Tinnitus relaxers can mask the sounds of tinnitus and relieve stress.

Combined hearing and sight loss

Many people are affected by both sight and hearing loss in later life. Contact Sense (**0300 330 9256**, sense.org.uk) or Deafblind UK (**0800 132 320**, deafblind.org.uk) for advice.

What equipment is right for me?

If you think you'd benefit from some aids or equipment, ask your local council's social services department for a free care needs assessment involving an occupational therapist or an assessor who has the appropriate skills and training. If you're living with both sight and hearing loss, you're entitled to a specialist assessment from your council involving an expert in deafblindness.

If you have sight loss, ask your local council if they offer a vision rehabilitation service. This is training and advice to help people adapt to sight loss, live independently and develop or regain skills.

You may choose to register as visually impaired with your local social services. To do this, you'll need a Certificate of Vision Impairment (CVI). You can get this by being referred to an eye specialist, who will measure your field of vision and how well you can see detail at a distance. Depending on the severity of your vision loss, they can determine whether you should be certified as sight impaired or severely sight impaired.

Once you receive your CVI, it will be shared with your local social services team with your permission. They will then get in touch with you to ask if you want to be included on the register of blind and partially sighted people. This step is completely voluntary and confidential. Although you don't have to register to get support from social services, registering makes it easier for you to prove your eligibility for certain concessions. Depending on the degree of your sight loss, these could include a half-price TV Licence, leisure discounts and help with NHS costs.

Paying for equipment

If your council assesses you as needing a particular aid or piece of equipment, they must provide this for free. You can ask for direct payments to buy the equipment yourself if you prefer. The council should clarify with you who owns the equipment and who is responsible for maintenance and repairs.

You may be able to get some equipment on loan or free. Low-vision clinics and hospital eye departments may offer small aids, such as magnifiers, on a long-term loan basis. British Wireless for the Blind provide specially adapted audio equipment on free loan to people who meet their criteria (**01622 754 757**, blind.org.uk).

Your local fire brigade may provide equipment related to safety and accident prevention, such as smoke alarms. You can find some free accessibility software, such as screen readers or magnifiers, online. This might not have all the features of commercial software but could be enough for your needs.

If you're buying equipment, don't be rushed into getting something you may not need. Think about how easy it is to set up and use, how often you'll use it and whether it will still be useful if your condition gets worse. In some cases, a multifunction device may be better than separate devices. See chapter 12 for general things to consider when you're buying.

11. Before you buy

Start by asking your local council's social services department for a free care needs assessment involving an occupational therapist – see chapter 1 for more information.

Should I buy or rent the equipment?

If you only need the equipment temporarily or you'd like to try out different models, consider renting rather than buying. If you're renting from a private firm, check the terms and conditions. Do you have to pay for the item to be serviced or insured, or is this included in the rental charge? Do you have to pay a deposit, or pay a delivery or collection fee?

Try before you buy

Trying out equipment before you buy it is a good idea. There are different ways to do this, depending on what you're buying.

- Find your nearest Disabled Living Centre in local directories, ask your local council or search online at livingmadeeasy.org.uk/contacts_edc.php.
- The Disabled Living Foundation's helpline can advise about mobility products and other disability equipment and where you can try it (**0300 999 0004**).
- Motability has events throughout the country, where you can try out scooters, electric wheelchairs, adapted cars and more. It's important to try out controls while the equipment is moving so ask for a test drive (**0300 456 4566**, motability.co.uk).
- In some parts of the country, the Red Cross lends wheelchairs and other equipment, such as walking frames and back rests (**0344 871 1111**, redcross.org.uk).
- Shopmobility lends electric wheelchairs, manual wheelchairs and scooters for use in shops and leisure facilities. Some local schemes are free, while others have a small fee (**01933 229644**, nfsuk.org).

If you can't find anything for your particular needs, some charities may be able to offer tailor-made solutions, for example, Remap (**01732 760 209**, remap.org.uk), Designability (**01225 824 103**, designability.org.uk) and Demand (**01923 681 800**, demand.org.uk).

Reviews from consumer organisations

Before choosing your equipment, compare prices and read consumer reports from organisations such as:

- the Disabled Living Foundation – **0300 999 0004**, livingmadeeasy.org.uk
- the Research Institute for Disabled Consumers – **020 7427 2460**, ridc.org.uk

You can also find reviews in disability publications, such as Able Magazine (ablemagazine.co.uk).



Good to know

Try to get at least three quotes to compare prices before making a purchase. Find out if the price includes any extras, such as maintenance and aftercare.

If you're buying online, remember you won't be able to try the equipment first and you may have to assemble it yourself.

You can get more buying advice from the Money Advice Service (**0800 138 7777**, moneyadvice.service.org.uk/en/articles/shopping-around-for-disability-aids-and-equipment).

12. General things to consider when you're buying

As with any item, you want the best product at the best price, but you also need it to be reliable and remain in good working order. When considering aids and equipment, think about the following questions.

- Does the company offer a guarantee and after-sales service?
- Are they a member of the British Healthcare Trades Association (**020 7702 2141**, bhta.com)?
- Will you need to buy insurance or a warranty, or is this included in the retail price? What does it cover?
- Will the product need servicing? Who will need to do this and where, and how much will it cost?
- If your item needs spare parts, are they affordable and how quickly could you get them?
- If the equipment stops working and you need to call out an engineer, how much would this cost?
- What's the returns policy if the item is faulty?
- If you have to order the item, is there a cooling-off or cancellation period, in case you change your mind?
- Have you calculated the running costs and the costs of any accessories you will need to buy?
- If you're buying second-hand, is the seller giving you as much protection and support as you'd like?

For more information on buying second-hand, see chapter 14.

Make sure you do your research and try the items before you buy, to see what would be best for you – see chapter 11.

13. How to pay for your equipment

Disability equipment can be expensive. If the cost of your equipment can't be met by the NHS or your local council, there may be money available to help you pay for it.

Motability

If you receive certain disability benefits, you can apply to the Motability Scheme to hire or buy an electric wheelchair, scooter or car. You'll need to be receiving one of the following:

- higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance
- enhanced rate mobility component of Personal Independence Payment
- Armed Forces Independence Payment
- War Pensioners' Mobility Supplement.

Your qualifying benefit must usually have a minimum of 12 months still to run.

If you're eligible, you can exchange part of your allowance for suitable mobility equipment. The agreement covers insurance, servicing, maintenance, breakdown cover and repairs. Your payment is given directly to Motability. You may have to make additional payments. Contact Motability for more information (**0300 456 4566**, [motability.co.uk](https://www.motability.co.uk)).

During the coronavirus outbreak, Motability is unable to accept applications to lease a vehicle on the scheme. If you are currently on the scheme, your lease should be automatically extended for another six months.

Grants and loans

Some charities will help with the cost of aids and equipment. Grants are usually only considered for equipment that is not provided by the council or the NHS. Charities will consider applications based on your individual circumstances – see chapter 8 of our factsheet **Extra help with essential costs if you're on a low income**.

For help finding grants and other financial support, contact Turn2us (**0808 802 2000**, turn2us.org.uk). Charities for specific conditions or illnesses may give grants or help you apply for funding – organisations like Macmillan Cancer Support or the MS Society, for example. Mobility Centres, Disabled Living Centres and local advice services may also be able to help you apply.

'Buy now, pay later' deals

Some suppliers offer financial or hire purchase deals, or deals to spread the cost. However, check the small print – some of these deals can work out to be very expensive. Consider whether it's your best option.



Good to know

If you're disabled or living with a long-term condition and paying for your own equipment, you don't have to pay VAT on some assistive technology and disability equipment. Installation, repairs and accessories are also VAT-free. You can find more information at gov.uk/financial-help-disabled/vat-relief.

14. Buying second-hand – what to consider

Buying second-hand can be cheaper, but choice may be limited. Consider what your requirements are – although the equipment may be cheaper, if it doesn't do what you need it to do, it's not worth buying. Check that the item is in good working order and safe to use.

Some equipment suppliers recondition second-hand items. Others sell ex-demonstration models that work as new, but may be slightly marked or dusty from being on display. Guarantees or warranties on these items are usually limited (for example, three or six months), so check with the supplier. Buying second-hand from a supplier can be more expensive than buying from an individual, but the equipment should be in good working order and you should have more guarantee against faulty equipment.

Some disability organisations and publications may publish details of second-hand equipment for sale. Make sure that any organisation you buy second-hand equipment from is accredited by the British Healthcare Trades Association (**020 7702 2141**, **bhta.com**).

Be cautious if you're considering buying second-hand from an individual. Make sure that the item is as they described it and that it works as they said it would. If possible, see the item before exchanging money, and use a method of payment that gives you some protections, such as PayPal goods and services.

15. I don't need my equipment any more. What should I do with it?

If your equipment was provided or loaned to you by your council, NHS service or a charity, contact them to ask them to collect the item.

If you bought the equipment yourself, some suppliers offer a buy-back or recycling service. This is usually only for items that can be reconditioned and sold on, so may not be available for custom-made equipment. The supplier may charge a collection fee.

A local voluntary support group may know of someone in need of the equipment. Alternatively, you can sell equipment privately, by putting ads on local message boards in shops and community centres, or using websites such as [disabilityequipmentservice.co.uk](https://www.disabilityequipmentservice.co.uk). Be careful about giving out your personal details – keep yourself safe. Action Fraud (**0300 123 2040**, www.actionfraud.police.uk) provides advice about how to keep yourself safe when buying and selling online.

If you own a mobility scooter and want a newer model, consider part-exchange. Not only will they reuse your old scooter, you'll get some cash towards your new one.

If you want to end your lease early under the Motability Scheme or if your allowance stops, you'll need to contact them. There may be an administration fee. If you paid an Advance Payment, you may get some of this back. Contact Motability for more information (**0300 456 4566**, [motability.co.uk](https://www.motability.co.uk)).

Some disability charities may accept donations of second-hand equipment if it is still in good working order.

16. Making a complaint

To the council

If you have a complaint about your local council – for example, if you've had to wait a long time for an assessment or for your equipment to be provided – try to resolve it informally first. If this doesn't resolve things, ask the council for their complaints procedure to make a formal written complaint.

If you're still unhappy with the council's response, you can ask the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman to investigate your complaint further (**0300 061 0614**, lgo.org.uk). See our factsheet **Complaints about care and health services** for more information.

To the NHS

If you have a complaint about the NHS – for example, about the NHS wheelchair service – try to resolve it informally first before making a formal complaint. You can also complain to the body that commissioned the service. This will probably be your Clinical Commissioning Group (england.nhs.uk/resources/ccg-directory).

If you're unhappy with the outcome of your complaint, you can contact the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (**0345 015 4033**, ombudsman.org.uk). See our factsheet **Complaints about care and health services** for more information.

Your local Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) can provide advice and support with your complaint. PALS can also arrange an independent advocate for you, if necessary. Details of your local PALS are available from your local library, GP surgery, dentist surgery or local hospital.

To a private supplier

If you have a complaint about a private supplier, you're protected by your consumer rights under the law. If the equipment is faulty, get in touch with the supplier as soon as possible. They may exchange the item for a new one or offer to repair it.

If this doesn't work, ask to speak to the manager or put your complaint in writing to the supplier. Contact the Citizens Advice consumer helpline (**03454 04 05 06**, [citizensadvice.org.uk](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)) for advice. They may refer your complaint to Trading Standards for further investigation. If the supplier is a member of the British Healthcare Trades Association (**020 7702 2141**, [bhta.com](https://www.bhta.com)), you can complain directly to them.

Our publications cover England only. While we make every reasonable effort to ensure that our information is accurate at the time of publication, information can change over time. Our information should not be used as a substitute for professional advice. Independent Age does not accept any liability for any loss however caused arising from the use of the information within this publication. Please note that the inclusion of other organisations does not constitute an endorsement from us.

The sources used to create this publication are available on request. Contact us using the details below.

Thank you

Independent Age would like to thank those who shared their experiences as this information was being developed, and those who reviewed the information for us.

How did we do?

To tell us what you think of our information, contact us using the details below. We will use your feedback to help us plan future changes to our publications.

If you would like to be involved in helping us to develop our information products, you can join our Readers' Panel. For more information visit www.independentage.org/readers-panel or call us.

Other formats

If you need this information in a different format (such as large print or audio CD), please contact us.

Contact us

Call us 0800 319 6789

Email advice@independentage.org

Visit independentage.org