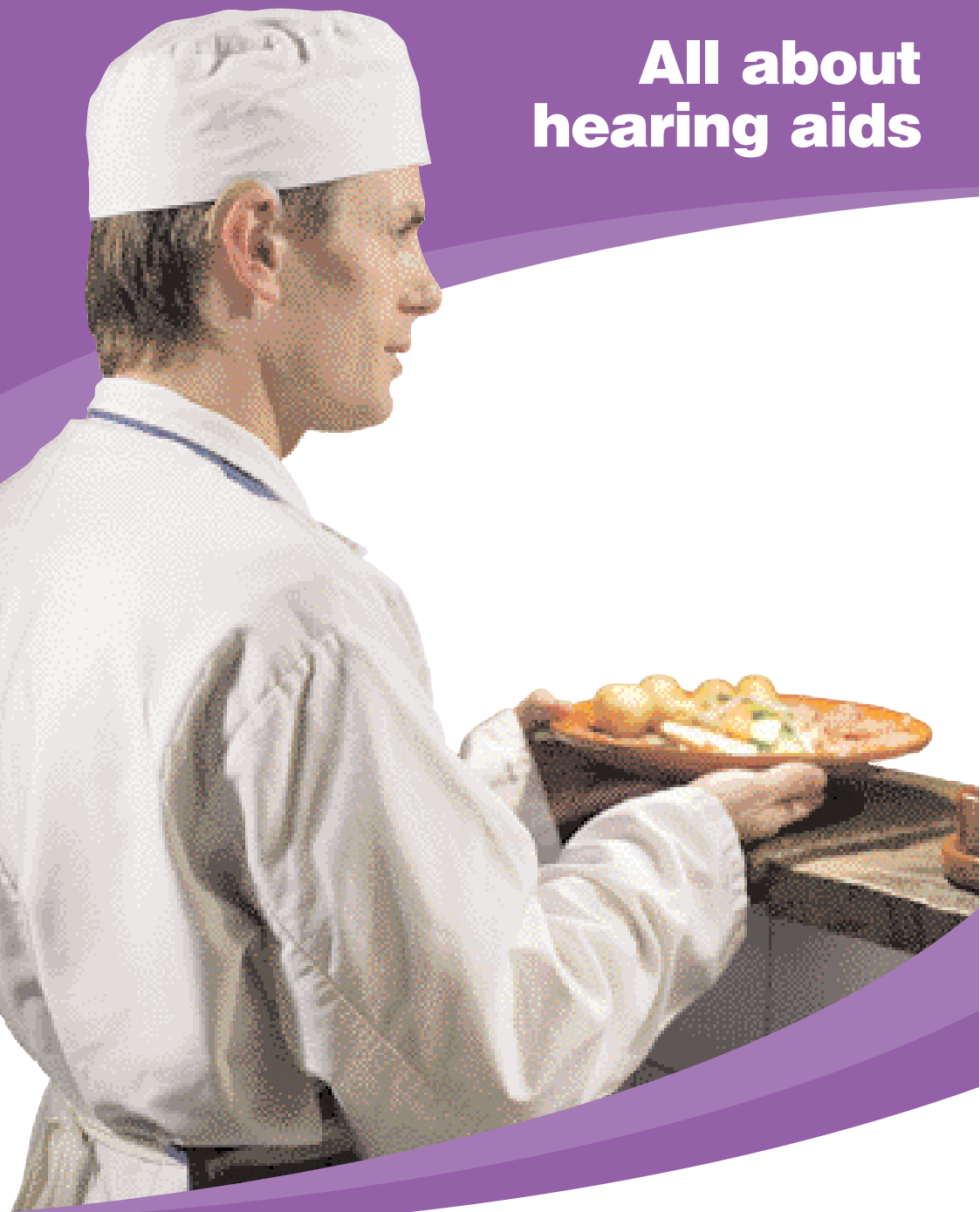


All about hearing aids



RNID • 

for deaf and hard of hearing people

About this leaflet

This leaflet is written for people who think they may need a hearing aid. It will also help you if you have just got your first hearing aid and want to know more about it.

This leaflet tells you:

- How hearing aids work.
- How to get a hearing aid on the NHS or privately.
- Different types of hearing aid.
- More about digital hearing aids and how to get one.
- How to use and look after your hearing aid.
- What to do if your hearing aid doesn't seem to be working properly.

The RNID Information Line can give you more information about hearing aids (see back cover for contact details).

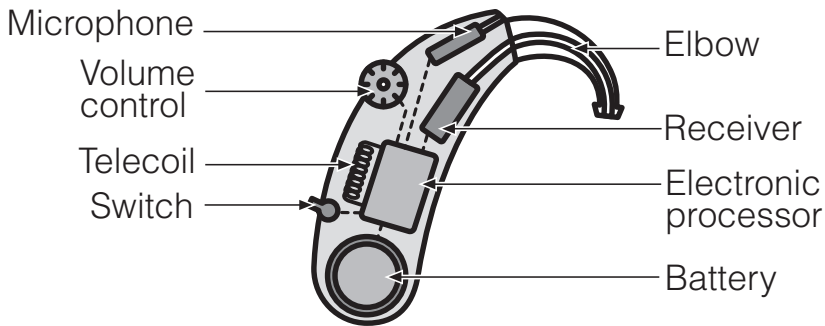
What is a hearing aid?

A hearing aid makes sounds louder so that you are able to hear them. It is battery-operated and you usually put it in or around your ear. Hearing aids are available in different shapes, sizes and types. However, all hearing aids work in a similar way.

Very simply, they all have a built-in microphone that picks up sound. This sound is then processed electronically, either by analogue circuits, or digitally. The resulting 'signals' are then passed to a receiver, or earphone, in the hearing aid, where they are converted back into sounds for you to hear.

A hearing aid also has an earmould – the part that goes in your ear – tubing and batteries.

The type of hearing aid you get will depend, for example, on your hearing loss and what you find comfortable. We tell you more about different types of hearing aid later.



What to expect from your hearing aid

A hearing aid won't give you perfect hearing. It will make sounds louder and may help you to hear on the telephone, make conversations easier and, as a result, increase your confidence when talking to other people. However, it won't necessarily make sounds perfectly clear.

A hearing aid will not make your hearing worse. If you have tinnitus – hissing, buzzing or other noises in your ears or head – you may hear it less when you use a hearing aid.

It takes time to get used to a hearing aid. However, keep trying it out until you are happy with it. Until you get used to using it in a lot of different situations, you won't know if it suits you. When you get your hearing aid, you should be given advice on how to get the best from it. You should also be shown how to use it and look after it. You can always ask for more help.

How to get a hearing aid

The first thing you need to do is get your ears and hearing checked to confirm you have a hearing loss and to see if a hearing aid will help. Your hearing difficulty may need medical investigation and treatment so it is a good idea to see your GP (family doctor) first, even if you are thinking of buying a hearing aid privately.

In the UK you can get a hearing aid free of charge on the NHS or buy it privately.

**Visit your GP to
get your ears
and hearing
checked**



Getting a hearing aid on the NHS

Visit your GP

To get a hearing aid on the NHS, you first need to visit your GP. They will refer you to an ear, nose and throat (ENT) consultant or an audiologist at a local hospital. At the hospital they will examine your ears and ask about your medical history, including any family deafness.

What happens next?

You will be seen by an audiologist who will test your hearing using an 'audiometer', which produces sounds with differing frequencies (pitch) and levels of loudness. You will be asked to tell the audiologist which sounds you can hear. The results are shown on a chart called an audiogram. The audiologist will use this to see if a hearing aid will help you.

If you are over 60, your GP may refer you directly to the audiology department so you won't have to go to ENT first.

Fitting a hearing aid

If you need a hearing aid, the audiologist will take an impression of your ear in order to make a snug-fitting earmould. Some hospitals may offer you one hearing aid for each ear, although policy about this varies. If you are offered two, it is a good idea to try them, as many people find two aids more helpful than one.

You will be asked to return to the hospital to get your new hearing aid a few weeks later when the earmould is ready. The audiologist will adjust your hearing aid to suit you and show you how to use and look after it. If your hearing aid is a digital one, you may be asked to come back to have it fine-tuned when you have tried it out in different situations. You should, in any case, be given a follow-up appointment within three months to discuss how you are getting on with your hearing aid. If you have problems with your aid(s) in between appointments contact your audiology department as you may be able to attend a repair session.

How long do hearing aids last?

Hearing aids last on average about five years. If you need a more powerful hearing aid or a new one, you will not have to pay for them. NHS hearing aids are free. So are new earmoulds, tubing, and batteries and, normally, repairs. However, if you lose or damage your hearing aid, you may be asked to pay something towards repairs or a replacement.

How long will I have to wait for a hearing aid?

If you want an NHS hearing aid you may have to wait several weeks or even months for a first appointment. After that you will have to wait again, for a few weeks, before you have your aid fitted.

Can I choose the sort of aid I want?

You cannot always choose the style of hearing aid you want. However, the NHS does have a range of hearing aids, and you should be able to get one that suits your particular hearing loss.

Buying your own hearing aid

If you want to buy your own hearing aid, you will need to find a private hearing aid dispenser. Ask your GP or a friend if they can recommend one. By law, all hearing aid dispensers must be qualified – or in supervised training – and registered with the Hearing Aid Council. This regulates dispensers' training and conduct, and handles complaints. The RNID Information Line can give you a list of hearing aid dispensers in your area, but cannot recommend one.

In some ways, getting your hearing aid privately is similar to getting one from the NHS. Your hearing will be tested and your hearing aid dispenser will show you how to use and look after your aid. You will, however, have to sign a contract agreeing to buy your hearing aid. Make sure you read the terms and conditions of this contract and find out about any money-back guarantee before you have your hearing test. Ideally, you should get at least 28 days to try out the hearing aid and be able to return it during this time if you are not satisfied with it.

Can I choose the style I want?

Some people prefer to buy a hearing aid privately so that they can choose the style they want. Some types of hearing aid – such as in-the-canal aids – are not available on the NHS. At present, NHS digital hearing aids are only available in some parts of the country (see later).

All private hearing aid dispensers must be registered with the Hearing Aid Council



How long will I have to wait?

Your hearing aid dispenser will probably see you within a week and you will be able to get your hearing aid within about two weeks.

How much do aids cost?

Hearing aids cost between £300 and £2,500 each. Medical insurance may cover part of the cost of a hearing aid, but check with your insurer first. When the guarantee runs out, you will also have to pay for repairs and the costs of this can mount up. You will also have to buy your own batteries. Hearing aids last about five years on average so remember that you will have to pay for new ones in the future.

You should also insure your hearing aid against loss, theft or damage if you buy it privately.

Different types of hearing aid

Hearing aids are described as analogue or digital, depending on the technology they use to process sound. Digital hearing aids are the newest kind of hearing aid. The following types of aid are available as digital or analogue – except for body-worn and bone conduction aids. Your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser will advise you on the most suitable type for you. If you find it difficult to manage small or fiddly controls or equipment, you may find that you prefer to use the larger type of aids. However, some people find it easier to put an in-the-ear type of aid into their ear.



Behind-the-ear (BTE) hearing aids have an earmould, which sits inside your ear. The hearing aid rests behind your ear and a plastic tube connects it to the earmould. They are the most common types of hearing aid and most people who get NHS hearing aids have one of these.



In-the-ear (ITE) and **in-the-canal (ITC) aids** have their working parts in the earmould so the whole aid fits into your ear. They tend to need repairing more often than BTE aids. Some ITE aids can be seen from the side. The smallest in-the-canal aids fit right inside your ear canal, where they cannot be seen. If you have severe hearing loss, or very small ear canals, these aids will probably not suit you.

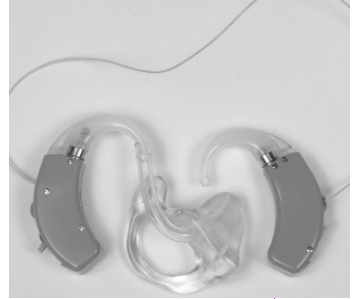
Body-worn hearing aids have a small box that you clip to your clothes or put in your pocket. This is connected by a lead to an earphone and earmould. Body-worn hearing aids are the most powerful hearing aids available and are more suitable for people with sight problems and/or problems using their hands.



Bone conduction hearing aids are for people with conductive hearing loss or people who cannot wear a conventional hearing aid. They deliver sound through the skull by vibrations. One type involves a small operation behind the ear.

CROS/BiCROS hearing aids

are for people with hearing in one ear only. CROS hearing aids pick up sound from the side with no hearing and feed it to the better ear. BiCROS aids amplify sound from both sides and feed it into the ear that has some hearing.



Disposable hearing aids

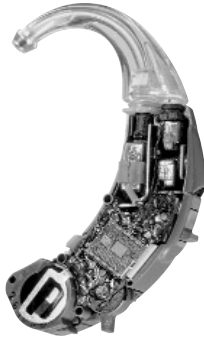
are only suitable for people with mild to moderate hearing loss. They can be thrown away and replaced with a new one when the battery runs out, usually after 10 weeks. You can buy them from some branches of Boots, the high street chemist. They cost from £26 a month for one aid.

Waterproof and **water-resistant hearing aids** have a thin membrane to help stop water getting into them. Waterproof aids are suitable for swimming and water-resistant aids can be used for other watersports.



What are digital hearing aids?

Digital hearing aids look just like modern analogue hearing aids but they are different because they process sound digitally using a tiny computer inside the aid. This makes it possible to process and customise sounds very precisely to suit your hearing loss and you can then listen to sound comfortably, whatever the pattern of your hearing loss. Many digital aids can be programmed with different settings for different sound environments that you can select at the touch of a button. Some adjust themselves automatically.



Can digital hearing aids help in noisy places?

One of the biggest problems for people with hearing aids is following what someone is saying in noisy places. Many digital hearing aids are designed to reduce steady kinds of background noise such as the rumble of traffic or the whirr of a fan. This makes listening more comfortable, though it does not

necessarily help you pick out one voice when many people are talking.

To help with this problem, many digital hearing aids use directional microphones to help you hear sounds best when they are directly in front of you so that you can focus on what you want to listen to.

Can they help with whistling and squeaking?

Some digital hearing aids are also designed to whistle or squeak less than analogue aids (see later, *When your hearing aid doesn't work properly*).

Getting a digital hearing aid on the NHS

Until recently you couldn't get digital hearing aids on the NHS. However, NHS hearing aid services are being modernised across the UK and digital hearing aids are now available in more areas in England. All services in England should be providing them by April 2005. In Wales, all audiology services are now delivering digital hearing aids. There is limited provision in Scotland and Northern Ireland. We hope that eventually funding will be made available to provide digital hearing aids on the NHS throughout the UK.

Getting a digital hearing aid privately

You can also buy digital hearing aids from a private hearing aid dispenser. They cost up to £2,500 each.

How to use your hearing aid

Once you get your hearing aid, it is important to practise putting it in your ear and using the various controls. This will help you get used to it and get the most from it. First, check that the earmould fits snugly but comfortably.

Using the controls on your hearing aid

Most hearing aids have a switch with different positions and a volume control wheel. Feel for the switch with your finger, switch your hearing aid on and off and adjust the volume to a comfortable level. Do this until you are used to the feel of your hearing aid. If you get used to changing the volume control right from the start, it will make it easier for you to adjust it when you need to, for example when you are with other people or if you go from a noisy environment into a quiet one.

Switch controls differ from one hearing aid to another. The most common ones are 'O' for 'off', 'M' for 'microphone' and a setting marked 'T'.

Have a look at the switch on your hearing aid. Normally, you use your hearing aid on the 'M' setting, and switch it to 'O' when you take it off. Very small hearing aids may not have an 'O' switch. To switch the aid off, you will need to open the battery door slightly.

The 'T' setting

Most hearing aids have a setting marked 'T'. When the switch is on the 'T' position, your hearing aid will be able to pick up sound from listening equipment, such as a loop system (see later, *Listening equipment*). This equipment transfers sound direct to your hearing aid, cutting out background noise. When you get your hearing aid, ask if it has a 'T' setting. If it is a very small aid, there may be no room for one. This means that you won't be able to use listening equipment with it.



Batteries

You will have to change the batteries in your hearing aid regularly. If you have an NHS hearing aid, you can get free batteries from any hospital audiology or ENT department that has a battery service. Sometimes you can also get them from your local health centre. You can also buy batteries from any pharmacy.

Getting used to your hearing aid

It may take several months to get used to your hearing aid. Start by wearing it once or twice a day for about an hour in quiet situations. Listen to everyday noises such as the kettle boiling or doors opening and shutting to get used to how they sound. Then try conversations with one person, again in a quiet room. Make sure the other person sits facing the light as it will make it easier to lipread them.

Next, try conversations with two people or in small groups. Don't expect to hear everything that is said, but try to follow the conversation. When you have practised using your hearing aid indoors, try using it outside. To start with, be careful not to have the volume too high when you go out because sounds, such as traffic, can be loud.

Finally, try using your hearing aid somewhere where it is noisy such as a restaurant or pub. This is likely to be the most difficult situation. You will probably not be able to hear everything that people say to you, but with time this should get easier.

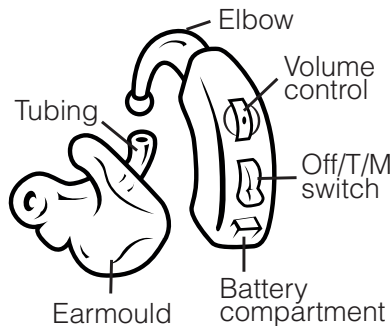
If you still can't get used to your hearing aid, talk to your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser.

Looking after your hearing aid

When your hearing aid is fitted you should get written instructions about how to look after it. If you are not sure about any of the information, ask your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser for advice.

Behind-the-ear (BTE) hearing aids

Wipe the hearing aid and earmould with a dry tissue every time you take your hearing aid off. Ideally, you should wash the earmould and tubing every night. If you can't do this, wash them at least once a week. Only wash the earmould and tubing. Do not wash the hearing aid – the part that contains the battery.



Don't unscrew the elbow (see diagram) from the hearing aid. Instead, gently pull the plastic tubing off the elbow but not from the mould. Wash the earmould and tubing in warm soapy water, and rinse them.

Blow down the tubing to get the water out, and let it dry overnight. Once it is dry, push the end of the tubing back on to the elbow. The tubing will need changing every three to six months before it hardens or splits and causes problems.

In-the-ear (ITE) hearing aids

There are two types of ITE hearing aids:

Custom ITE aids have only one part. If you bought an ITE hearing aid privately, it is likely to be a custom one. You must not wash these. Wipe them with a dry tissue and use a soft dry brush to remove wax from the opening. Do not poke anything into the opening as you may damage the earphone. These aids often come with instructions and cleaning tools to help you.

Modular ITE aids have an earmould attached to a hearing aid. You can separate the earmould from the hearing aid and then wash the earmould in soapy water. Wipe the hearing aid part with a dry tissue instead. Don't ever wash it or get it wet.

Ask your audiologist to make a new earmould if it wears out



In-the-canal (ITC) and completely-in-the-canal (CIC) hearing aids

You must not wash these hearing aids. Wipe them with a dry tissue and use a soft brush to clean wax from the opening. ITC hearing aids often come with special instructions and cleaning tools.

Body-worn hearing aids

If you have this type of hearing aid, wipe it all over with a dry cloth every time you take it out. Wash the earmould at least once a week. Gently pull the receiver off the earmould. Put the hearing aid (the part with the battery in), lead and receiver in a safe, dry place. Don't ever get these wet.

Wash the earmould with warm soapy water, using a soft brush to remove any wax blocking the opening in the earmould. Rinse and dry the earmould carefully. Leave it to dry overnight before you clip it back on to the receiver.

Earmoulds

Ask your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser to make a new earmould if it wears out.

Listening equipment

You can get a range of equipment to help you hear talks, conversations, or audiovisual equipment such as your television or stereo. Some of it is especially designed to be used with hearing aids on their 'T' setting.

A loop system has been fitted where you see this sign



- Loop and infrared systems are often fitted in places such as theatres, public halls, post offices and banks. Look out for a sign like the one on this page. You can also fit them at home.
- Telephones described as 'hearing aid compatible' have a kind of built-in loop. When you use this kind of telephone with your hearing aid on the 'T' setting, the sound you hear will be clearer and without background noise.
- You can also use conversation aids, radio microphone systems and listening equipment with your hearing aids by plugging in a neckloop or earloop, and switching your hearing aid to 'T'.

For more information about equipment contact the RNID Information Line.

When your hearing aid doesn't work properly

If you are having problems with your hearing aid, your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser should be able to help you. However, there are some common problems that you may be able to sort out yourself. Try the suggestions below. If they don't help, then ask your audiologist or your hearing aid dispenser.

If your hearing aid doesn't seem to be working:

- Check that you have not switched it to the 'T' position by accident.
- Make sure that the volume is at the correct level for you and not turned right down.
- Try putting a new battery in.
- If you have a BTE hearing aid, take it out, pull the tubing off the elbow and blow down the tubing to remove any condensation that may have collected and is blocking the tubing.
- Check that the earmould is not blocked with wax.

Buzzing noises may mean that you have switched your hearing aid to the 'T' position by accident. However, if this is not the problem, buzzing generally means your hearing aid has developed a fault and needs to be repaired.

Whistling or **squeaking** is caused by 'feedback'.

This happens when sound amplified by your hearing aid is fed back into it. It may happen if:

- You have not put the earmould in properly – push it gently to check.
- You have excess wax in your ears – ask your GP to check your ears.
- The earmould does not fit your ear closely enough. Put a little Vaseline on the mould to see if this helps by sealing the hearing aid in your ear. Be careful not to block the opening in the earmould as this will stop sound coming through.
- You have the volume too high.
- The earmould, elbow or tubing in a BTE aid becomes loose or splits. You will need to change the tubing in a BTE hearing aid when it begins to harden. Ask your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser to show you how to do this, and give you spare tubing. If the tubing gets very hard, the hearing aid may not work well. If it splits, the aid will start to whistle. If you find changing the tubing difficult, your audiologist or hearing aid dispenser can do this for you.

RNID's vision is of a world where deafness and hearing loss are not barriers to opportunity and fulfilment.

RNID is the largest charity representing the 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK. As a membership charity, we aim to achieve a radically better quality of life for deaf and hard of hearing people. We do this by campaigning and lobbying vigorously, by raising awareness of deafness and hearing loss, by providing services and through social, medical and technical research.

This leaflet is part of RNID's hearing aids range.

Published in December 2004.

Some photographs in this leaflet were posed by models.

www.rnid.org.uk

RNID Information Line

Contact us for a range of information on deafness and hearing loss.
RNID Information Line, 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL
Telephone 0808 808 0123 Textphone 0808 808 9000
Fax 020 7296 8199 informationline@rnid.org.uk www.rnid.org.uk

RNID Tinnitus Helpline

Contact us for information and advice about tinnitus.
RNID Tinnitus Helpline, 19-23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL
Telephone 0808 808 6666 Textphone 0808 808 0007
Fax 020 7296 8199 tinnitushelpline@rnid.org.uk www.rnid.org.uk

RNID Sound Advantage

We sell a range of equipment for deaf and hard of hearing people.
RNID Sound Advantage, 1 Haddonbrook Business Centre,
Orton Southgate, Peterborough PE2 6YX
Telephone 0870 789 8855 Textphone 01733 238020
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