



Senior Series

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So You Need a Hearing Aid

It is well known that a person who has poor eyesight would not consider trying to function without glasses or contacts, but many who cannot hear well simply resign themselves to living in an increasingly quiet world. Since hearing loss often occurs very gradually, an individual may not realize how serious the problem has become. Others may not want to be seen wearing a hearing aid. In addition, the very thought of buying a hearing aid can be quite confusing and intimidating. The wisest advice is to become an informed consumer.

Where Do You Begin?

There are several schools of thought as to the first steps you should take if you suspect a hearing loss. There are some professionals who suggest the first stop should be with the audiologist, and others who feel

the first stop should be with the physician. Clearly a thorough hearing evaluation is needed to determine the type of hearing loss you have and what options exist for treating your hearing loss. This type of testing is usually done by an audiologist, a non-physician specialist with a graduate degree in the measurement and treatment of hearing impairment. In some areas, particularly rural ones, there may not be an audiologist nearby; you may need to go directly to a hearing aid dealer instead. Dealers have less formal education than audiologists and generally use more limited diagnostic equipment. However, they may have a great deal of practical experience in fitting hearing aids. It is advisable to make sure that the audiologist or hearing aid dealer is licensed in your state. If you have any doubts as to their qualifications, check with the local Better Business Bureau or licensing

board in the state for a record of past consumer complaints.

If the audiologist or hearing aid specialist believes that your hearing loss requires further medical attention, he or she should refer you to a physician, internist, family physician, or ear, nose, and throat specialist (ENT). The U.S. Food and Drug Administration requires that a licensed physician evaluate your hearing within six months before you purchase a hearing aid, unless you sign a waiver. However, for first-time hearing aid users, bypassing the medical evaluation may not be in your best interest. A physician can tell whether your hearing loss might be corrected by something as simple as removing wax from your ears or if your hearing impairment is a sign of something more serious. A recent study suggested that 20 percent of older adults seeking assistance for hearing loss from an ear, nose, and throat specialist required medical treatment; the other 80 percent could have benefited from hearing aid use. This has fueled the debate, especially in light of managed care, as to which type of provider you should see first in seeking help for your suspected hearing loss.

How Do Hearing Aids Work?

Not all hearing aids work the same way. The inside mechanisms of hearing aids vary among devices even

if they are the same style. Three types of circuitry or electronics are used: Analog/Adjustable, Analog/Programmable, and Digital/Programmable. Hearing aids are simple in principle. All hearing aids consist of a tiny microphone, amplifier, and speaker, as well as a battery to power them. Hearing aids vary in their circuitry and overall design, which in return affects the price. Many hearing aids have become smaller in recent years in response to consumer demand. However, smaller is not always better. The type of hearing aid that is appropriate will depend on the type and degree of hearing loss you have.

There are four basic styles of hearing aids that are currently recommended. Each style of hearing aid may use different levels of technology. The basic styles of hearing aids include: behind the ear (BTE), in-the-ear (ITE), in-the-canal (ITC), and intra-canal (CIC). The style of hearing aid describes where and how the hearing aid fits your ear. The different levels of technology are described as conventional (analog), improved (analog/programmable instruments), and advanced (fully digital programmable). Even the best hearing aids cannot bring damaged hearing back to normal. New technology however, has made a significant difference in the way these devices compensate for hearing loss. One of the main prob-

lems with traditional hearing aids is that they amplify all sounds, both loud and soft. The result is often confusion and frustration for the hearing aid user. The newest, most sophisticated hearing aids can be adjusted to compensate for some of the natural patterns of hearing loss, and provide greater flexibility and clarity in difficult listening environments.

How Much Do Hearing Aids Cost?

The more sophisticated the technology, the more expensive the hearing aid. Costs of hearing aids can range from \$600 for a conventional hearing aid to more than \$2,000 for a fully digital hearing aid. Rarely do insurance policies cover the cost of a hearing aid; however, the cost of the hearing evaluation may be covered. Check with your insurance provider for specifics about their guidelines for obtaining coverage for a hearing evaluation. A frequently asked question is whether or not the expense of new hearing aid technology is worth considering. Typically for those who have tried conventional hearing aids with limited success or those who live or work in a noisy environment with significant demands on their hearing, it is worth the investment if you can afford it. A licensed and certified audiologist or hearing aid specialist can guide you in making this decision.

Questions to Ask When Purchasing a Hearing Aid

1. Is the audiologist or hearing aid specialist reputable? Is he or she licensed?
2. How long has the person been in practice? What is his or her training?
3. How much does the hearing aid cost? How much is the evaluation of hearing? Are the costs combined or separate? Which services are covered in the cost? Are follow-up visits included?
4. Is there a warranty on the hearing aid? Can the warranty be extended? Note: The average life of a hearing aid is three to five years.
5. Are repairs done “in-house” or mailed out? What is the approximate turn-around time? If the repair is mailed out, is a loaner hearing aid available for you to use?
6. Are one or two hearing aids recommended? Note: Do not be put off by a recommendation for two hearing aids. Hearing aids on both ears can help with balance, localizing sound, and hearing in background noise. Two hearing aids are not appropriate for everyone. Ask for the pros and cons as it applies to your hearing loss.

7. What type of hearing aid does the audiologist or hearing aid specialist feel is best for your loss? Note: Mail order hearing aids do not take into account the individual's hearing loss. Avoid these types of offers.
8. What is the trial period with the hearing aid? Most states require a trial period of at least 30 days. If you are not satisfied with the hearing aid, can you return it and receive a refund?
9. How often will you be seen for appointments? If you are having a problem, how soon can you be seen?
10. Do they sell batteries and other hearing-related devices or supplies you might need?
11. Do they offer any special classes on hearing aid adjustment and communication strategies?

Hearing aids are just that—aids. They will not fully restore your hearing loss, but they will help you maximize the hearing you do have. Adjusting to hearing aids takes time. You most likely did not lose your hearing overnight, and you will not adjust to your hearing aid overnight. It will take time, practice, and patience to adjust, but the end results will be worthwhile.

Sources

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