

Choosing Your Hearing Care: Understanding the Options

Choosing Your Hearing Care: Understanding the Options



Deciding to get help for your hearing loss is a big step! It can feel a bit overwhelming, especially with all the different options out there. Finding the right care that fits your needs and your budget is important. This guide will help you understand the different levels of hearing care available today.

Why Are There So Many Choices?

In the past, the only avenue for being fit with hearing aids was through the healthcare model. Although this was comprehensive it was often cost-prohibitive for a large number of patients since insurance typically does not cover hearing aids. Today, there are more options than ever so it can be tricky to know where to go. You need to think about:

- **Where to get your hearing aids:** Different places offer different levels of service.
- **What kind of hearing aids are best for you:** Options range from simple sound boosters to highly customized devices.
- **Who will help you:** The qualifications and experience of your hearing professional are crucial for a successfully optimized fit and sound long-term care. This more comprehensive, and often more expensive option, provides access to a knowledgeable professional for ongoing support—whether you're experiencing listening difficulties, your aid breaks or your hearing needs change. This tier offers evidence-based fittings, which involve measuring patient performance with their hearing aids on to verify that the best possible access to the entire speech spectrum for their specific hearing loss has been achieved.

Ideally, everyone would get the most advanced and personalized hearing aids. But if that's not possible, understanding your options is key to making your best choice.

THE THREE TIERS OF HEARING CARE

We can generally group hearing care into three main tiers, each with its own approach, benefits, and costs.

Tier 1: Personalized Care at Evidence-Based Audiology Clinics

What it is: These clinics are typically run by highly trained audiologists (professionals with doctoral degrees like AuD or PhD). They often own their practices and are licensed to dispense hearing aids.

What to expect:

- **Comprehensive Care:** Audiologists here are experts in rehabilitating all types of hearing loss and are trained to look for risk factors for possible medical conditions that might be affecting your hearing. They are also in close communication with local ear doctors (otologists).
- **Advanced Technology:** They can fit you with a wide range of hearing aids, from basic to the most sophisticated models from major international manufacturers (like Oticon, Widex, Starkey, GN Resound, Signia and Phonak). These aids can usually be reprogrammed by other audiologists across the country and abroad.
- **Customized Service:** This is the most personalized level of care, with fittings that are precisely tailored to your hearing needs and ongoing support. Audiologists here often "bundle" their services (like fittings, adjustments and follow-ups) into the price of the hearing aids, so you're buying a complete care package, not just the device. It is important to understand that only some practices offer evidence-based services. Asking up front about which services are bundled into the price being offered for each hearing aid can help you determine if you are getting what you are paying for or whether it is justified to jump to a different tier of service.
- **Cost & Insurance:** Although there are a range of devices and prices, this is often the most expensive option. **Medicare does not cover hearing aid expenses.** Some private insurances, unions, No-Fault or Veterans Associations might cover all or part of the costs, but not the ongoing rehabilitative services for fitting and maintaining your hearing aids. Be sure to check with your insurance provider. Hearing aid packages from Tier 1 centers can range from around of \$1500- \$3800 depending on the level of technology chosen for the naturalness of sound. They also include multiple visits to obtain and verify an easy-to-use, comfortable fit. It's important to take advantage of these visits during the trial period, which is a minimum of 45 days in the state of NY.

Who are Tier 1 services are for?

- **All children and adults with any type or degree of hearing loss.**
- **Children (under 18) especially benefit** from this level of care, as their hearing aid performance requires special attention and verification. If you're bringing a child, ask about the audiologist's experience with pediatric fittings.
- Anyone looking for the most individualized and comprehensive hearing solution.

THE THREE TIERS OF HEARING CARE

We can generally group hearing care into three main tiers, each with its own approach, benefits, and costs.

Tier 2: Value-Focused Care at Big Box Stores & Mid-Level Service Audiology Centers

What it is: In the last 10-15 years, larger chains and "Big Box" stores have become popular for hearing aid services. They often buy hearing aids in bulk or manufacture their own, which can lead to cost savings for customers. Staff at these centers might include hearing instrument specialists (who have on-the-job training) and/or audiologists.

What to expect:

- **Targeted Savings:** These centers often focus on a common type of hearing loss called **presbycusis**, which is the gradual, age-related hearing loss that typically affects older adults.
- **Streamlined Services:** To keep costs down, the fine-tuning of hearing aids often relies on your feedback rather than extensive, specialized measurements of the hearing aid's performance in your ear. For many people with mild-to-moderate presbycusis, this approach works well, especially if they are good at reporting how they hear.
- **Proprietary Aids:** A key point to remember is that the hearing aids from these centers might be proprietary, meaning other audiologists outside that specific chain may not be able to adjust or fine-tune them.
- **Longer Trial Periods:** Some Big Box companies, like Costco, are known for offering trial periods longer than the legal minimum, sometimes more than 3 months.

Who are Tier 2 services designed for?

- **Adults with presbycusis (age-related hearing loss)** typically in their 60s and 70s, (or 80s if they have been successfully using hearing aids for a while or have milder new losses).
- Individuals who do NOT have high hearing demands (e.g., retired individuals or people who work in jobs with low auditory communication demands, such as computer-related jobs).
- People who have generally good speech understanding when sounds are loud enough and who do NOT have other complicating factors like poor vision, thinking and processing difficulties, or bothersome ringing in the ears (tinnitus).

THE THREE TIERS OF HEARING CARE

We can generally group hearing care into three main tiers, each with its own approach, benefits, and costs.

Tier 3: Over-the-Counter (OTC) Hearing Aids

What it is: Since 2022, the FDA has allowed certain hearing aids to be sold over-the-counter (OTC) without needing a professional fitting or follow-up care. This move was based on research suggesting that treating hearing loss early can benefit brain function and prevent "auditory deprivation" – where your brain gets less sound input over time, making rehabilitation harder later on.

What to expect:

- **DIY Amplification:** Most of these devices are pre-set and simpler, designed to give a general boost to speech sounds.
- **Lower Cost & Easier Accessibility:** OTC aids are a low-cost way to try amplification and are available online, at Walmart and in some drugstores. They're meant to make help more accessible and prevent untreated hearing loss.
- **Limited Power & Customization:** They are not as powerful or customizable as prescription hearing aids and are specifically for people with mild to moderate hearing loss. They are NOT a replacement for professional care, especially for more significant hearing loss.

Who are Tier 3 service designed for?

- **Adults aged 18 and older** with **mild to moderate hearing loss** who need a general boost in sound.
- Any adult looking for an inexpensive way to try mild to moderate gain amplification or prevent auditory deprivation.



IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU BUY

No matter which tier you choose, make sure you understand the details of your purchase:

- **Trial Period:** How long do you have to try the hearing aids and return them if they don't work out?
- **Warranty:** What's covered if you lose or damage the hearing aids? How long does the warranty last?
- **Life Expectancy:** How long are the hearing aids expected to last before needing replacement?

Measuring Your Benefit: How Do You Know How Well They're Working?

- Before your trial period begins, it's important to understand how your hearing professional will check if your hearing aids are truly helping you. This is key to getting the most value from your investment.

Two Main Ingredients Toward Achieving A Great Fit:

- **Objective Measures:** Your audiologist performs specific tests to see how the hearing aids are actually performing in your ears. This ensures they're precisely set for your unique hearing loss.
- **Your Feedback:** Your input on how you're hearing in daily life is also incredibly valuable. This means you should wear the trial hearing aids as much as possible during the trial period. This will help you better identify any areas of discomfort or continued communication difficulties, and allows the audiologist to see how well your auditory system is acclimating to the aids.
- When both objective measures and your personal feedback are used, your hearing aids can be customized and optimized for the best possible results. This comprehensive approach takes more time, so the overall cost of your hearing aid package will likely be higher. Some providers might rely only on your feedback without these objective measurements. This can be a less expensive option and adequate for many hearing losses. However, there's a chance your hearing aids won't be as finely tuned or provide the best possible benefit they could.

Choosing the right path for your hearing health is a personal decision. By understanding these different tier levels of care, you can make an informed choice that best suits your needs and helps you hear your best! If you need help, contact our ENT division's audiologist Kristi Mohr, AuD at (631) 638-4142. If you are having difficulties listening on the phone, you may email her at kristi.mohr@stonybrookmedicine.edu. Make sure to put "**patient with questions about hearing aids**" in the title.