



Buying a Hearing Aid: Answers to common questions

I Don't Hear Well. What Should I Do? What Should I Expect?

Because some hearing problems can be medically corrected, first visit a physician who can refer you to an otolaryngologist (an ear, nose, and throat specialist). If you have ear pain, drainage, excess earwax, hearing loss in only one ear, sudden or rapidly progressive hearing loss, or dizziness, it is especially important that you see an otolaryngologist. Then, get a hearing assessment from an audiologist (a nonphysician health care professional). A screening test from a hearing aid dealer may not be adequate. Many otolaryngologists have an audiologist associate in their office who will assess your ability to hear pure tone sounds and to understand words. The results of these tests will show the degree of hearing loss and whether it is conductive or sensorineural and may give other medical information about your ears and your health.

Conductive Hearing Loss

A hearing loss is conductive when there is a problem with the ear canal, the eardrum and/or the three bones connected to the eardrum. Common reasons for this type of hearing loss are a plug of excess wax in the ear canal or fluid behind the eardrum. Medical treatment or surgery may be available for these and more complex forms of conductive hearing loss.

Sensorineural Hearing Loss

A hearing loss is sensorineural when it results from damage to the inner ear (cochlea) or auditory nerve, often as a result of the aging process and/or noise exposure. Sounds may be unclear and/or too soft. Sensitivity to loud sounds may occur. Medical or surgical intervention cannot correct most sensorineural hearing losses. However, hearing aids may help you reclaim some sounds that you are missing as a result of nerve deafness.

Where Do I Purchase Hearing Aids?

Because federal regulation prohibits any hearing aid sale unless the buyer has first received a medical evaluation from a physician, you will need to see your physician before you purchase a hearing aid(s). However, the regulation says that if you are more than 18 years old and are aware of the recommendation to receive a medical exam, you may sign a waiver to forego the exam.

An otolaryngologist, audiologist, or an independent dispenser can dispense aids. Hearing aids should be custom fitted to your ear and hearing needs. Hearing aids purchased by mail-order typically cannot be custom fitted.

Cost Of Hearing Aids

Hearing aids vary in price according to style, electronic features, and local market conditions. Price can range from many hundreds of dollars to more than \$2,500 for a programmable, digitalized hearing aid. Purchase price should not be the only consideration in buying a hearing aid. Product reliability can save repair costs and the frustration of a malfunctioning hearing aid.

Styles Of Hearing Aids

There are several styles of hearing aids:

- Behind-the-ear (BTE) hearing aids are placed over the ear and connected with tubing to custom-fitted earpieces.
- In-the-ear (ITE) hearing aids fill the entire bowl of the ear and part of the ear canal.
- Smaller versions of ITEs are called half-shell and in-the-canal (ITC).
- The least visible aids are completely-in-the-canal (CIC).

Hearing aid options, which are appropriate for your particular hearing loss and listening needs, the size, and shape of your ear and ear canal, and the dexterity of your hands will all be considered in deciding what type of hearing aid is the best for you. Many hearing aids have special telecoil "T" switches to aid in use of the telephone and certain public sound systems. Discuss your need for a T-coil switch while you are considering hearing aid options.

Will I Need A Hearing Aid For Each Ear?

Usually, if you have hearing loss in both ears, using two hearing aids is best. Listening in a noisy environment is difficult with amplification in one ear only, and it is more difficult to distinguish where sounds are coming from. If, however, the quality of hearing in one ear is very different from the other, one hearing aid may be better than two.

What Other Questions Should I Ask?

- Ask about charges for the hearing evaluation, dispensing fee(s), and future servicing and repair.
- Inquire about the trial period policy and what fees are refundable if you return the hearing aid(s) during the trial period.
- Ask about the warranty coverage for your hearing aids and the consumers' protection program for hearing aid purchasers in your state.

What Will Happen At My Hearing Aid Fitting?

- The hearing aids will be fitted for your ears.
- Then, while wearing your hearing aids, you will be tested for word understanding in quiet and in noise and for improvement in hearing tones.

- Next, you will receive instruction about the care of your hearing aids, the batteries used to power them, a suggested wearing schedule, general expectations, and helpful communication strategies.
- You will also practice properly inserting and removing the hearing aids and batteries.

How Should I Begin Wearing The Aids?

- Start using your hearing aids in quiet surroundings, gradually building up to noisier environments.
- Note where and when that you find the hearing aids beneficial.
- Be patient and allow yourself to get used to the aids and the "new" sounds they allow you to hear.
- Keep a diary to help you remember your experiences.
- Report any concerns on a follow-up appointment.