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What You Need to Hear about Hearing Health and How Your Audiologist Can Help



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FACTS WORTH HEARING

Hearing allows us to engage in the world of sound around us. It offers us both comfort (the soothing sound of a mother's lullaby) and protection (a fire alarm), while enhancing our ability to learn, to communicate and to experience pleasure through music and other sounds.

Damage to the inner ear from loud noise, aging, exposure to ototoxic drugs and certain medical conditions can reduce our ability to hear—often happening so slowly and subtly that others may notice the change in our hearing before we do.

It is estimated that more than 30 million Americans have a hearing loss (approximately 1 out of 10 people). Hearing loss affects people of all ages. In fact 65 percent of people with hearing loss are younger than age 65! One in six baby boomers have a hearing problem. One in fourteen Generation Xers already have hearing loss. At least 1.4 million children have hearing problems (source Better Hearing Institute).

Some Common Misconceptions about Hearing Loss and Treatment

“My particular type of hearing loss is untreatable.”

This is unlikely. In most cases, hearing loss due to nerve damage in the ears can be helped through amplification. Other types of hearing impairments may be medically or surgically treatable.

“Wearing hearing aids is a sign of old age.”

Actually, more people will notice your hearing loss than will notice your hearing aids. Avoiding conversations, answering questions inappropriately, asking to have the TV volume turned up and asking people to repeat themselves are all more conspicuous than a small device in your ears.

“With today's hearing aids, I'll be able to hear perfectly.”

Although the technology has improved tremendously in recent years, hearing aids still do not restore normal hearing. They aid in hearing. That said, most hearing aid users report significant improvements in hearing ability and quality of life through the use of hearing aids.





AUDIOLOGISTS ARE HEAR FOR YOU

Hearing loss can be difficult to accept at any age, but there is help available. Contact an audiologist in your area for a complete diagnostic evaluation and advice about the best method of treatment. An audiologist is a state-licensed healthcare professional who specializes in evaluating the hearing of adults, infants and children, and in implementing appropriate corrective treatment via hearing aids, rehabilitative services or other technological means as needed.

Healthcare plans may provide coverage for a baseline hearing test, and most insurance companies recognize audiologists as preferred providers of hearing health services. For Medicare recipients, a hearing evaluation is a covered benefit when ordered by your physician for diagnostic purposes. There have been substantial advances in hearing assistance technologies over the past several years. Your audiologist will be able to determine the nature of your hearing problem and recommend the most appropriate action for you.

How do I know if I need my hearing evaluated?

- Do you often feel like people are mumbling?
- Do you have difficulty talking on the phone or listening to the TV or radio?
- Do you complain that you hear people, but you don't understand what they are saying?
- Do others complain that you have a hearing problem?
- Do you have trouble understanding conversation if there is background noise?
- Do you frequently need to ask other people to repeat what they have said to you?
- Do you avoid social activities where you need to hear well?
- Do you have ringing in your ears?
- Do you have a history of ear infections?
- Do you experience dizziness?
- Do you have a family history of hearing loss?
- Do you have any history of exposure to loud noise?



If you answered YES to any of the questions above, you should consider undergoing a complete hearing evaluation performed by a licensed audiologist in your area (visit www.audiologist.org to find an audiologist near you). In addition, both children and adults are encouraged to have hearing tests every two to three years to help detect hearing loss. Annual hearing checkups are recommended for those who are exposed to potentially damaging loud noises such as farmers, hunters, machinists, musicians, airline workers, and carpenters.



PREVENTION: STILL THE BEST CURE

Hearing can be protected from additional damage due to loud noise exposure by following the **H.E.A.R.** strategy:

Hold Yourself Accountable: It's all about education and action, and like most preventive health measures, you are in the best position to ensure that you practice behaviors that support healthy hearing for yourself and your family.

Evaluate Your Surroundings: In general, if you are standing three feet away from someone and cannot hear what they are saying, the noise level could be damaging to your hearing. Noise can damage hearing with long-term exposure to sound levels at or above 85 dBA SPL (see Figure 1 below).

Avoid the Noise: The easiest way to avoid noise-induced hearing loss is to avoid the noise! Turn down the volume on your stereo or Mp3 player, and whenever possible move away from the sources of loud noise to diffuse the overall sound intensity and thereby reducing the likelihood of damage to your inner ear.

Remember Protection: If you are not able to avoid excessive noise, muffle it! Earplugs decrease the intensity of the sound traveling to your ear drum and should be worn at all times while working near power tools, firearms, heavy machinery etc.



FIGURE 1: DECIBEL LEVELS BY ACTIVITY/EVENT

| Decibel Level | Activity/Event |
|---------------|--|
| 30 dB | Whisper, quiet library |
| 50-65 dB | Normal conversation |
| 85 dB | Lawnmower, shop tools, truck traffic |
| 95 dB | Movie in a movie theater |
| 100 dB | Farm tractor, cement mixer, snowmobile |
| 110 dB | Video arcade, chainsaw, pneumatic drill/jackhammer |
| 115 dB | Sandblasting, loud rock concert, auto horn |
| 140 dB | Gun muzzle blast, jet engine |

Source: NIDCD, http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/education/teachers/common_sounds.asp



For more information visit www.audiologist.org

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT HEARING HEALTHCARE

Hearing is a gift that helps us to learn, share ideas and enjoy the pleasures of music, nature and conversations with friends and loved ones. Untreated hearing loss can result in negative social, psychological, and cognitive health effects. Individuals with a suspected hearing or balance disorder should be evaluated by an audiologist as soon as possible to determine the type, degree, and cause of the problem. The audiologist can then begin treatment or refer to the appropriate specialist.



Q: What is an audiologist?

A: An audiologist is a healthcare professional specializing in assessment and management of the auditory-vestibular system. The current standard of education is the Doctor of Audiology (Au.D.) degree. Audiologists must also meet their state's licensure requirements to practice *clinical audiology*, which is the application of scientific principles, methods and procedures for evaluation and treatment related to disorders of the auditory and balance systems.

Audiologists are qualified to assess and treat infants, children and adults. In addition to diagnosis and treatment, audiologists also provide appropriate amplification, counseling, education and training so that individuals with hearing impairment can communicate and enjoy life.

Audiologists also engage in a wide variety of research activities to develop new hearing assessment techniques and new rehabilitative technologies, particularly in the area of hearing aids and other devices. Research reports, written by audiologists are routinely found in peer-reviewed, audiologic, medical and scientific journals.

Audiologists practice in a variety of environments, including: private practice clinics, hospitals, schools, universities and industrial settings. Audiologists help develop professional standards for hearing healthcare and are represented on the boards of directors of national and governmental agencies.



Q: Why should I choose an audiologist as my hearing healthcare provider?

A: Audiologists are highly trained healthcare professionals. In fact, they are the only professionals who are university trained and licensed to specifically identify, evaluate, diagnose, and treat hearing disorders.

Audiologists use specialized equipment and procedures to accurately test for hearing loss. These tests are typically conducted in sound-treated rooms with calibrated equipment. The audiologist is trained to inspect the eardrum with an otoscope, perform cerumen (ear wax) removal, conduct diagnostic audiologic tests, and check for medically-related hearing problems. By virtue of their education, training, and licensing, they are the most qualified professionals to assess and treat hearing disorders.

Your audiologist can advise you if hearing aids are recommended for your hearing loss and provide the necessary fitting services. It is important to remember that hearing aids alone are seldom the instant answer to your hearing problems. They are just a part of the treatment process, which should also include fitting verification, individual counseling, instruction and detailed follow-up that your audiologist will provide. It takes time to adjust to hearing aids, and without careful assessment, expert programming and counseling from an audiologist during this process, optimum results are far less likely.

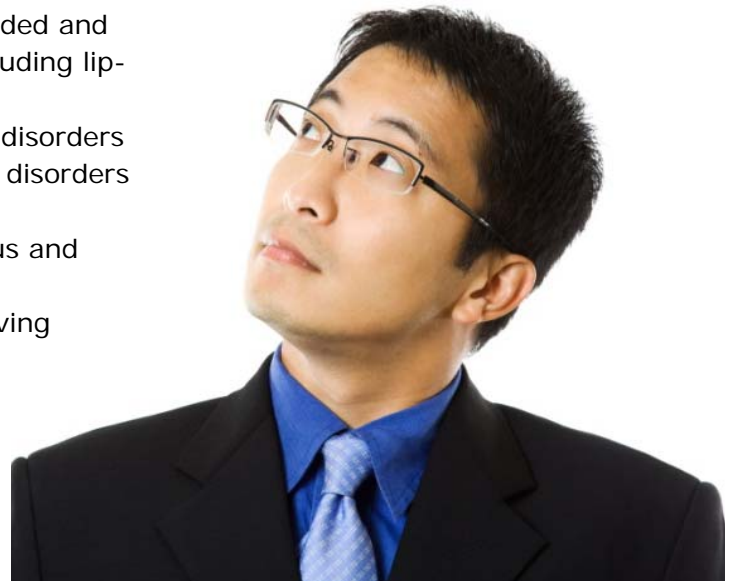
In addition to hearing disorders, audiologists are able to assess and treat balance system dysfunctions, and are trained to perform detailed evaluations of balance and equilibrium. Many are also trained in the treatment of tinnitus (ringing in the ears) and hyperacusis (aversion to loud sounds). They participate as full members of vestibular rehabilitation teams to recommend and carry out goals of vestibular rehabilitation therapy including habituation exercises, balance retraining exercises, and general conditioning exercises.

Audiologists are also experts in hearing loss prevention, and are able to provide counseling and resources to help prevent noise-induced hearing loss and to monitor hearing and balance disorders that may result from the administration of ototoxic medications.

Q: What is the difference between an audiologist and a “hearing aid specialist”?

A: One key difference between an audiologist and a “hearing aid specialist” is the minimum amount of education required. Audiologists must currently earn a professional degree (the Doctor of Audiology, or Au.D.) which typically involves 4 years of academic and clinical training in audiology, following a traditional 4-year bachelor’s degree. By contrast, very few educational requirements need to be met (they vary by state) before a non-audiologist can sell hearing aids; in fact, in many states, the minimum requirement is a high school diploma, passing a license exam, and some form of brief apprenticeship with a licensed hearing aid specialist. Another major difference between an audiologist and a hearing aid specialist lies within their scopes of practice. Audiologists are licensed and trained to manage many areas of hearing healthcare including:

- Comprehensive audiological evaluations including tests of hearing sensitivity, speech understanding, middle ear function, inner ear and auditory nerve function
- Diagnostic tests for balance/dizziness disorders
- Auditory processing evaluations for infants, children and adults
- Design, selection, fitting and verification of hearing instruments and assistive listening devices
- Design, selection, installation and monitoring of classroom amplification systems
- Rehabilitation therapy for hearing disorders which might include strategies to improve aided and unaided hearing, speech-reading (including lip-reading) and sign language
- Rehabilitation for auditory processing disorders
- Rehabilitation for vestibular (balance) disorders
- Cerumen (earwax) management
- Evaluation and management of tinnitus and hyperacusis
- Patient and family counseling about living with hearing loss
- Development of hearing conservation programs
- Research and development of new evaluation techniques and rehabilitation strategies



By contrast, the scope of practice for hearing aid specialists is very limited. They perform the following services:

- Basic hearing tests exclusively for the purpose of selling hearing aids to adults
- Hearing aid fitting and sales



Q: How do I choose an audiologist?

A: When it comes to your hearing health, choosing an audiologist is the most important decision you will make. Selecting an audiologist who is licensed, well-trained, highly educated, and communicates well is vital to your successful treatment. The Academy of Doctors of Audiology (ADA) can help.

To become a Fellow Member of ADA, one must have earned the Doctor of Audiology (Au.D.) professional degree. In addition, ADA provides members with continuing education and peer-mentoring opportunities that enhance clinical skills and promote quality patient care.

ADA member audiologists subscribe to a code of ethics which outlines their responsibility to:

- Protect the welfare of their patients
- Maintain high standards of professional competence, integrity, conduct and ethics
- Maintain a professional demeanor in matters concerning the welfare of patients served
- Provide accurate information to patients served and to the public about the nature and management of auditory disorders and about the profession and services provided by members
- Engage in conduct which shall enhance the status of the profession.

The majority of ADA member audiologists are engaged in private or autonomous practice, which provides additional patient benefits including:

- Highly personalized care
- Convenient clinic locations
- Flexible office hours
- Diverse selection of hearing aids
- State-of-the-art treatment options.

Visit www.audiologist.org or call (866) 493-5544 for more information or to find an ADA member audiologist in your area.



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Q: What if I don't think I can afford hearing aids?

A: According to a recent national survey, conducted by the Better Hearing Institute, two out of every three people age 55 and older with hearing loss report that the cost of hearing aids is a key reason for not seeking treatment.

Hearing aids are not covered under Medicare or by the majority of private insurers. In fact, 73 percent of hearing aid purchases involve no third-party payment. However, most insurance plans, including Medicare, do pay for a diagnostic hearing evaluation by a participating audiologist.

There are two important actions that you can take to ensure that the cost of treatment doesn't prevent you from hearing your best, now and in the future.

First, share your financial concerns with your audiologist. She/he can work with you to find the best treatment available within your budget, and can also recommend financing options to assist you.



Second, contact your legislator to enact legislation that will enable you and the more than 30 million Americans with a hearing impairment to obtain more affordable treatment for hearing loss. If passed, legislation recently introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives (HR 1046) and the U.S. Senate (SB 1019), will provide financial assistance to treat hearing loss by creating a tax credit, to be used toward the purchase of hearing aids (up to \$500 per hearing aid, available once every five years). The ADA supports this important legislation and encourages you to advance efforts to ensure affordable treatment for hearing impaired individuals throughout the nation, by writing a personal letter to your Representative and Senator, urging them to support these federal bills. Visit www.audiologist.org for more information about this important legislation and to download a template letter to send to your legislators.

For more information about hearing healthcare, please contact:

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