

Hearing



Many older adults are affected by some hearing loss. If left untreated, any extent of hearing loss may worsen over time. Hearing is very important for daily functioning so problems with hearing are quite serious and should be addressed as soon as possible. It is important that people with difficulty hearing consult their doctor. Knowing the symptoms and taking appropriate treatment measures can help stop and, in some cases, even reverse hearing loss. If you find that you have trouble hearing, or know someone who does, please read the information below.

Hearing Loss and Aging

About one-third of Americans between the ages of 65 and 74 have hearing problems. About half the people who are 85 and older have hearing loss. Whether a hearing loss is small (missing certain sounds) or large (being profoundly deaf), it is a serious concern. If left untreated, problems can get worse.

Hearing loss can affect your life in many ways. You may miss out on talks with friends and family. On the telephone, you may find it hard to hear what the caller is saying. At the doctor's office, you may not catch the doctor's words.

Sometimes hearing problems can make you feel embarrassed, upset, and lonely. It's easy to withdraw when you can't follow a conversation at the dinner table or in a restaurant. It's also easy for friends and family to think you are confused, uncaring, or difficult, when the problem may be that you just can't hear well.

If you have trouble hearing, there is help. Start by seeing your doctor. Depending on the type and extent of your hearing loss, there are many treatment choices that may help. Hearing loss does not have to get in the way of your ability to enjoy life.

How Do I Know if I Have a Hearing Loss?

See your doctor if you:

- Have trouble hearing over the telephone,
- Find it hard to follow conversations when two or more people are talking,
- Need to turn up the TV volume so loud that others complain,
- Have a problem hearing because of background noise,
- Sense that others seem to mumble, or
- Can't understand when women and children speak to you.

What Should I Do?

If you have trouble hearing, see your doctor. Sometimes the diagnosis and treatment can take place in the doctor's

office. Or your doctor may refer you to an otolaryngologist (oh-toh-layr-ehn-GOL-luh-jist), a doctor who specializes in the ear, nose, and throat. The otolaryngologist will take a medical history, ask if other family members have hearing problems, do a thorough exam, and suggest any needed tests. You may be referred to an audiologist (aw-dee-AH-luh-jist). Audiologists are health care professionals trained to measure hearing. The audiologist will use an audiometer to test your ability to hear sounds of different pitch and loudness. These tests are painless. Audiologists can help if you need a hearing aid. They can help select the best hearing aid for you and help you learn to get the most from it.

What Causes Hearing Loss?

Hearing loss can have many different causes, including the aging process, ear wax buildup, exposure to very loud noises over a long period of time, viral or bacterial infections, heart conditions or stroke, head injuries, tumors, certain medicines, and heredity.

What Different Types of Hearing Loss Are There?

Presbycusis (prez-bee-KYOO-sis) is age-related hearing loss. It becomes more common in people as they get older. People with this kind of hearing loss may have a hard time hearing what others are saying or may be unable to stand loud sounds. The decline is slow. Just as hair turns gray at different rates, presbycusis can develop at different rates. It can be caused by **sensorineural** (sen-soh-ree-NOO-ruhl) hearing loss. This type of hearing loss results from damage to parts of the inner ear, the auditory nerve, or hearing pathways in the brain. Presbycusis may be caused by aging, loud noise, heredity, head injury, infection, illness, certain prescription drugs, and circulation problems such as high blood pressure. The degree of hearing loss varies from person to person. Also, a person can have a different amount of hearing loss in each ear.

By MedicineNet.com

How Do I Get Hearing Aids?

To get hearing aids, you should first have a hearing evaluation to determine the type and amount of your hearing loss. The process begins with a medical and audiologic examination.

- **Medical examination.** The medical examination may be performed by any licensed physician including your family doctor or pediatrician, but preferably should be done by an ear, nose, and throat specialist (an otolaryngologist). You will need an examination of your ear, nose, and throat and possibly other testing to rule out any medical reason for your hearing loss, such as infection, injury or deformity, ear wax in the ear canal, and, in rare cases, tumors. You will receive documentation of your medical exam and a statement that says you are a hearing aid candidate.
- **Audiological examination.** An audiological exam, or audiogram, involves a hearing evaluation by a hearing health professional who specializes in evaluation, non-medical treatment, and rehabilitation of hearing loss (an audiologist) to identify the type and amount of your hearing loss, to determine the need for medical/surgical treatment and/or referral to a licensed physician, and to provide rehabilitation of the hearing loss.

What if I don't want to have a medical examination?

The law requires that patients intending to buy hearing aids must either have a medical exam or sign a waiver saying they do not want a medical exam to rule out a medical reason for their hearing loss before buying hearing aids. **FDA believes that it is in your best health interest to have a medical examination by a licensed physician -- preferably one that specializes in ear diseases -- before buying hearing aids.**

Where should I go to get hearing aids?

Go to a reputable licensed hearing healthcare professional. This may be an audiologist, a hearing aid dispenser, or an ear, nose, and throat physician (an otolaryngologist). To find out if a healthcare professional is licensed, check with your local Better Business Bureau, consumer protection agency, State Attorney General's office, or the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA).

What questions should I ask before buying hearing aids?

Before you buy a hearing aid, ask your hearing healthcare professional these questions:

- Which type and style of hearing aids would most meet my needs?
- What special features do my hearing aids need to have to fit my lifestyle?
- Will I need one or two hearing aids?
- What is the total cost of the hearing aids?
- Do the benefits of newer technologies outweigh the higher costs?
- Is there a trial or adjustment period for me to try out the hearing aids? (Most manufacturers allow a trial/adjustment period during which aids can be returned for a refund.)
- What fees are nonrefundable if I return the hearing aids after the trial/adjustment period?

- How long is the warranty? Can it be extended?
- What is covered during the period of warranty? Does the warranty cover future maintenance and repairs? Will loaner aids be provided when repairs are needed?
- How should I care for my hearing aids?

How do I choose hearing aids?

It is important to select the hearing aids that are convenient and easy for you to use, and provide the best compensation for your hearing loss. You will want to wear your hearing aids regularly. Other features to consider include parts or services covered by the warranty, estimated schedule and costs for maintenance and repair, options and upgrade opportunities, and the hearing aid company's reputation for quality and customer service.

You should ask your dispenser if the hearing aids you choose provides a trial/adjustment period during which your hearing aids can be returned for a refund. Most states require a mandatory trial/adjustment period. A trial/adjustment period will allow you to test out your hearing aids to see if it works well for you.

How do I know if hearing aids work for me?

It takes time and patience to get used to hearing aids. You should wear your aids regularly to help you maximize the benefits of your hearing aids. Get familiar with your hearing aids and their features. Practice putting the hearing aids in and taking them out. Learn to adjust the volume in different listening environments. Test your aids in various listening environments and determine where you have problems hearing. Talk to your hearing healthcare professional about any problems hearing with your aids, and have changes made to your hearing aid settings if necessary. Work with your hearing healthcare professional until you are comfortable and satisfied with your hearing aids.

How do I care for my hearing aids?

Proper maintenance and care is important in extending the life of your hearing aids.

- Avoid using solvents, alcohol, or water on hearing aids because they can cause damage to the internal electronics of the hearing aid.
- Avoid exposing hearing aids to heat because this can damage them. For example, leaving them in sun or in the car, placing them in or near a microwave or conventional oven, or using a hair dryer on them.
- Clean hearing aids as instructed. Earwax and ear drainage can damage your aids.
- Avoid using hairspray and other hair care products while wearing your hearing aids.
- Turn off your hearing aids when not in use.
- Replace dead batteries immediately.
- Keep batteries and hearing aids away from children and pets.
- Visit your hearing healthcare professional on a regular basis to have your hearing aids inspected.

By U.S. Food and Drug Administration