

Shopping for hearing health care

Written by Dr. Stephanie Long, Audiologist



About 31.5 million Americans (one in 10) have hearing impairment, according to AARP. Surprisingly, *“there are more baby boomers aged 45-64 with hearing loss than there are people over the age of 65 with hearing loss.”* Since changes in hearing can happen slowly, they can be difficult for people to recognize, especially so for middle-agers who may assume they are still too young to be affected by such a *“senior”* issue.

When hearing loss occurs, but is not addressed, it affects not only that person, but also those they love because communication becomes more difficult. Family members can become impatient and frustrated. The individual experiencing the hearing impairment can grow increasingly tired and stressed from putting forth more effort to listen.

Many people with hearing changes find it particularly difficult to hear children’s and women’s voices, as those tend to be softer and higher in pitch. Hearing loss does not occur equally, across all pitches. Similar to when reading glasses are needed for smaller print, people can need amplification for just high frequency soft sounds such as the *“s”* or *“th”* sounds. These sounds are the *“small print”* of hearing and are critical for both clarity and understanding.

When someone finally accepts the fact that they have a hearing impairment, the next step is to meet with a knowledgeable hearing specialist. An audiologist can help them reach their goal of communicating naturally and participating actively once again. Initially, they can easily become overwhelmed with the choices that are available. It is understandable that someone would want to find the best solution, but not want to pay more than necessary for it. While everyone knows someone who has purchased an aid that simply sits unused in a drawer, the good news is that hearing aid satisfaction has increased significantly in recent years, mostly due to improved technology.

In order to increase the likelihood of a successful outcome, there are steps you can take to become an educated consumer. AARP has an excellent online resource for purchasing hearing aids. One of the most important considerations is to be sure the provider you select has adequate testing equipment that is in a sound-controlled environment. The sound-controlled environment ensures the accuracy of the test. Also, since one size does not fit all, it is advisable to select a provider who works with a variety of manufacturers. This makes it more likely that a solution will be customized for you, rather than making your needs fit into what that provider dispenses.



About Better Care Audiology

It is critical to know that even if their hearing tests are exactly the same, no two patients are alike. To ensure successful hearing aid use, adjustments for each individual's listening environment are necessary. Similarly, always ask questions about the trial period, return policy, and costs for repairs and adjustments, as these vary widely. In addition, ask questions about your provider's training. For example, audiologists have a master's or doctoral degree in audiology, and have passed national and state licensure requirements. Hearing instrument specialists are licensed by the state. It is important to note that there are ethical and competent providers within each category.

Once you've selected a provider, do not go alone. It is helpful to have a friend or family member along to help sort through all of the information. After looking in your ears to ensure the ear canal and ear drum are healthy, the audiologist should perform a comprehensive evaluation, including your ability to understand speech clearly. Ask the audiologist to explain these results to you so that you understand your hearing needs.

In addition, be sure to share with the dispenser where you are having difficulty so he or she can determine what your listening needs are. For example, listening at a church group is different than listening to the television at home. Customized solutions are available for these very different environments.

Although more technology does tend to provide better results, solutions for hearing loss should be available in a variety of price points to accommodate your budget. The provider you choose should be able to explain the pros and cons of the different models so you can find a solution that works for your hearing needs and your budget.

When you've chosen your hearing solution, it's also helpful to bring someone along to your first hearing aid fitting. After all, you did not choose a hearing solution in order to be able to hear the audiologist; you got it to hear the people you want to hear!

Remember that your hearing is a personal choice. Your solution should be comfortable and provide the solutions YOU need. Hearing well is important for your quality of life!