

Hearing Loss and Selecting a Hearing Aid



One in ten Americans has a hearing loss.

FIRST, GET YOUR HEARING TESTED

Primary Care Physician

The primary care physician can perform a basic examination to determine if there are any conditions causing your hearing loss that can be treated, such as wax in the ear canals or fluid in the middle ear. The doctor may then refer you to an ear specialist for further evaluation. If you are told by anyone that you have "nerve deafness," and there is nothing that can be done for you, seek another opinion - preferably from an audiologist and/or physician who has expertise and experience in testing people with hearing loss. Many individuals wearing hearing aids have sensorineural hearing loss (nerve deafness), the most common cause of progressive hearing loss. A hearing aid will not cure hearing loss, but, a hearing aid can help you hear better.

Ear Specialist (Ear, Nose and Throat Physician - Otolaryngologist, Otolologist)

Some people go directly to an ear specialist for a more detailed examination of their ears and hearing. This is important to be sure your hearing loss is not caused by a condition that can be treated by medical or surgical means. The ear specialist should then refer you to an audiologist for a complete hearing evaluation.

Audiologist

Some people go directly to an audiologist. Audiologists are highly educated and trained health care professionals qualified to do a thorough evaluation of your hearing. In addition, audiologists are experts with other types of assistive listening devices (ALDs) including individual and group listening systems, telecommunication devices and personal alerting equipment. The audiologist can determine the type and degree of hearing loss and whether or not you can be helped by a hearing aid and what type of hearing aid would be best for you. The audiologist who evaluated your hearing may dispense hearing aids, or can refer you to one who does. To find audiologists licensed in the State of Oklahoma, the Oklahoma Board of Examiners for Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology maintain an online listing at www.obespa.state.ok.us or call toll-free at 1-866-840-2774.

Hearing Aid Dealer and Fitter

You can go to a hearing aid specialist or dealer. Hearing aid specialists do not have post-graduate degrees in audiology and, therefore, do not provide diagnostic audiological services. However, they do have practical experience in the fitting and selection of hearing aids. If you live in a rural area, the hearing aid specialist may be the only hearing health professional available. For your consumer protection the State of Oklahoma requires a hearing aid specialist to maintain a license and is registered as a "dealer and fitter" through the State Department of Health (www.health.state.ok.us). You can also check to see that the dealer is certified by the National Board for Certification in Hearing Instrument Sciences (www.hearingnbc.org).

SELECTING A DISPENSER

The term dispenser applies to ear specialists, audiologists, and hearing aid specialists who fit and sell hearing aids. They should spend time to help you find the right hearing aid, and schedule several visits to work with you for adjustments and in teaching you how to use and maintain your hearing aid. They should be available to provide warranty or out-of-warranty service for the life of the aid.

- Find out what program they have in place to teach you to use the aid and to communicate most effectively.
- Make sure the dispenser gives at least a 30-day trial period (this is the law in some states including Oklahoma). This gives you time to "test drive" the aid, just as you would when buying a new car.
- Check, beforehand, which fees are nonrefundable should you need to return the aid. Typically, costs for testing, custom-fit parts, and/or ear molds, are nonrefundable.
- Does the dispenser provide repair services? Is a loaner available should your aid need repair?
- Select a dispenser who offers different types of hearing aids - behind-the-ear, in-the-ear, and in-the canal styles.
- Make sure the dispenser takes time to ask about your listening needs in detail.
- Don't be pressured into purchasing an aid. Seek a second opinion if you want more information or want to compare prices.

Purchasing the Right Hearing Aid for You

There are many manufacturers making hearing aids in a wide variety of models. There is no "best" hearing aid. The selection of a hearing aid depends on your degree of hearing loss, listening needs, dexterity, and your financial situation. Just because someone you know likes a particular hearing aid, it may not be the best one for you. Ask about various options available in the hearing aid, such as a telecoil. For a small, additional cost, the telecoil enhances telephone use and allows you to use assistive listening systems in theaters, meetings, etc.

Cost

Hearing aids vary greatly in cost; a conventional hearing aid may cost \$400 and can increase in price up to \$4500 each for a digital hearing aid. The cost is not covered by Medicare and few insurance plans cover them, though medical and audiological evaluations may be covered. Understand pricing. Some dispensers bill separately for testing, the hearing aids, and other services. Most quote one price that includes many services as well as the aids. Until you know which aid you will need, you won't be able to know the complete price. When you purchase your hearing aid, be sure to get a purchase agreement or contract containing all terms of the transaction in writing. Is there a written warranty? Is the warranty honored by the manufacturer, the dispenser, or both? If you need a hearing aid but cannot afford one, there are funding resources available to help you such as HEAR NOW (800) 648-4327 or low interest bank loans through BancFirst. Call ABLE Tech for eligibility information for the low interest bank loan, or to apply for a loan, call BancFirst at (800) 446-9401.

WHEN SELECTING A HEARING AID REMEMBER:

- Do not rush into buying a hearing aid. Spend time researching this major purchase, just as you would a car.
- First get a thorough evaluation of your hearing by a qualified hearing health professional.
- Audiologists can advise you on which hearing aid is best suited for your lifestyle and listening needs. Another consideration will be what you can afford.
- Most hearing aids are programmed, so the skill of your provider is an essential factor in determining your satisfaction. Ask which speech processing strategy is best for you, rather than which hearing aid is best.
- Hearing aids with digital circuitry are the newest type. They may be a good choice for your particular hearing loss. However, they are the most expensive.
- Programmable aids can be customized to fit your needs and there are a wide range of features to consider, such as directional microphones, telecoil, direct audio input and remote control.
- Know your rights about a trial period as you adjust to an aid.
- There will be provider return policies but there may be state laws to protect you as well.
- Ask the audiologist about the possibility of trying one hearing aid for a while and then trying another one out for a while to compare.
- Be aware that it may take a while for the brain to adjust to a hearing aid, so you can't always determine right away if you will like it.
- Bring appropriate expectations: hearing aids may help you cope more effectively in communication, but they will not restore normal hearing.
- Be aware that hearing aids do not work well in all situations.
- Assistive listening devices, such as FM, infrared and loop systems, used in conjunction with hearing aids, improve hearing aid effectiveness in difficult listening situations, such as noisy restaurants.
- Purchasing a hearing aid by mail or telephone is not recommended as it will be hard to fit the right hearing aid for your needs.

Resources:

**Central Oklahoma Association for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired (COAD-HI)* Hearing aids available to low income individuals and information and referral services. Oklahoma City (405) 236-5513

**Oklahoma SHHH Chapter - Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, Inc.*, Oklahoma City 405-721-1146, Website: <http://www.okc-shhh.org/>

**Oklahoma ABLE Tech*, Assistive Technology Project of Oklahoma (888) 885-5588

**Central Oklahoma Association for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired* Oklahoma City (405) 236-5513.

**National Self Help for Hard of Hearing People* www.hearingloss.org

**HEAR NOW* toll-free at (800) 648-4327

**AARP - New Guide on Hearing Aids*, www.aarp.org

Books:

The Consumer Guide to Hearing Aids booklet, Cost \$5 through www.shhh.org or 301-657-2248; 301-657-2249 TTY

The Hearing Aid Handbook: Users Guide for Children

Hearing Aids: A Users Guide

The Consumer Handbook on Hearing Loss and Hearing Aids (do not expect a comparison of specific brands/models)

Consumer Reports and Consumer's Digest - general articles on hearing aid selection