

Guide to Hearing Aids - Buying a Hearing Aid

Nearly two-thirds of Americans age 70 and older have experienced mild to severe [hearing loss](#), and yet only one-fifth use hearing aids. Hearing problems, in fact, often are accepted as an inevitable part of aging, says Frank Lin, M.D., assistant professor in the Division of Otolaryngology at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

But, like [heart disease](#) or high blood pressure, hearing loss, left untreated, can lead to serious problems. Problems commonly associated with hearing loss — loneliness and isolation — are among those older people fear the most, Lin says. And now a new study by Johns Hopkins and the National Institute on Aging finds that men and women with hearing loss are much more likely to develop [dementia](#) and [Alzheimer's disease](#).

People with severe hearing loss, the study reports, were five times more likely to develop dementia than those with normal hearing. Even mild hearing loss doubled the dementia risk. That risk, says Lin, a coauthor of the study, appeared to increase once hearing loss began to interfere with the ability to communicate — for example, in a noisy restaurant.

A hearing aid will not completely restore your hearing — and there's no evidence yet that it will prevent dementia — but you can "expect substantial benefits," says Sergei Kochkin, who heads the Better Hearing Institute, an industry-funded nonprofit.

How To Get The Right Hearing Aid

Top experts in the field give advice on how to shop for and choose a [hearing aid](#).

1. Don't go it alone. Bring along a friend or relative. "One of the most important steps you can take is to bring a spouse, family member or friend to the examination," says Juliette Sterkens, an audiologist in Oshkosh, Wis. "Two people hear and remember more."

2. Interview a provider. "The number one thing to remember is that the value you get out of your hearing aid is based on the skills and abilities of the hearing health professional," says Sergei Kochkin of the Better Hearing Institute. Audiologists and hearing instrument specialists are both licensed to sell hearing aids, but audiologists hold a master's or doctoral degree in audiology. Get referrals from health care professionals. **3. Know before you go.** "Most people have had trouble

with their hearing for years," says Barry Freeman, an audiologist and chairman of the board of the National Council for Better Hearing. Yet they wait an average of five to seven years before buying a hearing aid. The worse the hearing loss, the harder it is for your brain to adjust, so it's important to act as soon as you think you may have hearing loss. When new patients come to him, Freeman quizzes them: "What do you want the hearing aid to do for you? Do you just want to be able to hear the television? Or do you hope to hear the sermon in church?" Knowing your priorities will help the professional determine what style and technology are best for you.

4. Have your hearing tested. During your visit, you should be given a hearing test in a soundproof booth. It will tell the audiologist or hearing specialist what type of hearing loss you have so a hearing aid can be programmed specifically for you. Not all devices will fit every person or every degree of hearing loss. And "these are custom-made devices," says Linda Remensnyder, an audiologist near Chicago. "It's not prudent to buy online or from a big-box retail store."

5. Try before you buy. Ask for a demonstration of the hearing aids recommended for you. An audiologist may be able to put a disposable plug on the tip of a behind-the-ear hearing aid and program the device to your hearing loss so you can experience how it works. A simulated sound field also can show how a hearing aid works in particular situations, so check the hearing aid in noisy settings. And take your time. "This is way too important and costly a decision to make in a hurry," says Sterkens.

6. Ask about add-ons. Don't be pressured into buying extras you don't need — all technology comes at a price. However, directional microphones that help you hear in noisy places, tele-coils that help with phone conversations, and feedback cancellation that prevents the aid from squealing all received high marks from [Consumer Reports](#). Wireless technology makes it easier to use cellphones and televisions, and ear wax protection can prevent malfunctions. But consider what you really need. "If you generally don't go out a lot or you entertain at home, you may not need as many advanced features, which can [save you money](#)," says Tobie Sanger, *Consumer Reports* senior editor.

A hearing test will help determine the best hearing aid for your needs. —**7. Can you hear me now?** After you buy your hearing aid, don't leave the office without checking whether it fits. And not just physically; does it do what you want it to do? Ask to have an automated "real ear" test to see how it works in your ear.

8. Get it in writing. Get a signed copy of a contract that outlines what you're buying — the model and make of hearing aid — and the price, trial period, any nonrefundable fees as well as the warranty, says Lise Hamlin, director of public policy for the [Hearing Loss Association of America](#). Most manufacturers allow a 30- to 60-day trial period, and follow-up visits are a must. "Expect at least three or four in the first two months," says Sterkens.

9. Ask about training. There is more to buying a hearing aid than just fitting it to your ear. "You don't hear with your ear, you hear with your brain, and your brain doesn't know what to do with the sound after you get your hearing aids," says Freeman. Ask your audiologist about aural education and rehabilitation. Some auditory training can be done at home with a personal computer or through group sessions.

Consumer Reports senior editor Tobie Stanger and her colleagues worked for more than a year on a project involving lab tests of hearing aids and a national survey of 1,100 people with [hearing loss](#). In the project, *Consumer Reports* shoppers, all hearing-impaired, bought 48 aids and had their fitting checked by audiologists. Two-thirds were incorrectly fitted — underscoring the fact that you need to be a savvy consumer. Here's Stanger's advice on how to be a smart buyer.

— Jeff Nikasaka

Q. Which is better, going to an audiologist or a hearing aid specialist?

A. Generally, we concluded you might want to start — aside from the Veterans Administration if you are eligible — with an ear, nose and throat doctor who employs an audiologist. That was a good combination according to our survey.

Q. What's the secret to living successfully with a hearing aid?

A. Give yourself time to adjust. All states mandate a time period — usually 30 to 45 days — so you can try the device, because you're going to need at least that much time to get used to it. Try it out, get used to cleaning it and putting it on in the morning, get used to sounds in different environments. It's different from putting on a pair of glasses, where you see better right away. It takes a while for your brain to adjust, and people's brains adjust in different ways.

Q. How important is follow-up?

A. One of the reasons the aids are so expensive is that the cost generally includes the service of fitting and following up more than once with the hearing aid provider. You should take advantage of that. I wouldn't recommend using a provider that doesn't include follow-up with the purchase of your aid.

Q. Are the most expensive brands necessarily better?

A. The best for you might not be a highly sophisticated model with all the bells and whistles. Why waste your money? You have to be careful. They are going to try to sell you features that may not be necessary.

Q. What features might be worth the money?

A. We did find a few features everyone should get: a telecoil — to help you listen on the telephone — a directional microphone, and feedback suppression to prevent that annoying squealing noise.