FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT HEARING HEALTHCARE

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

Q: What is an audiologist?
A: An audiologist is a healthcare professional, specializing in prevention, assessment, and non-medical management of hearing disorders. An audiologist is a practitioner who meets the state’s qualifications to practice clinical audiology, which is the application of scientific principles, methods and procedures for measurement, testing, appraisal, prediction, consultation, counseling, habilitation, rehabilitation, or instruction related to disorders of the hearing and balance systems relating to hearing loss.

Audiologists are qualified to assess and treat infants, children and adults. In addition to diagnosis and treatment, audiologists also provide counseling, education and training so that individuals with a hearing impairment or balance disorder can benefit from amplification and communication devices and/or other forms of treatment.

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. Research reports of audiologists can be found in the professional literature of medical and scientific journals.

Audiologists work in a variety of different environments because of their extensive scope of practice, 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 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 audiologic disorders of hearing. Today, a doctorate (Au.D.) degree is required to become an audiologist.

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 and vestibular 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 and balance disorders.

Your audiologist can advise you if hearing aids are recommended for your hearing loss. It is important to remember that hearing aids alone may not be an instant answer to your hearing problems. They are just a part of the treatment process, which should also include the comprehensive testing, careful counseling, instruction and follow-up that an audiologist will provide. It takes time to adjust to hearing aids, and without expert counseling from an audiologist before and after you obtain hearing aids, successful rehabilitation is far less likely.

In addition to hearing disorders, audiologists are able to assess and treat balance system dysfunctions. Audiologists are trained to perform detailed evaluations of balance and equilibrium. They participate as full members of vestibular rehabilitation teams to recommend and carry out goals of vestibular rehabilitation therapy including, for example, 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 raise awareness about the danger of ototoxic substances.
Q: What is the difference between an audiologist and a hearing aid dealer?

A: One key difference between an audiologist and hearing aid dealer is the minimum educational requirements necessary. Audiologists are required to have graduated from an accredited audiology program with a Doctorate or Masters degree. By contrast, very few educational requirements need to be met (they vary by state) before a non-audiologist can sell hearing aids. Another major difference between an audiologist and a hearing aid dealer lies within their scopes of practice. Audiologists are certified and trained to manage many areas of hearing healthcare including providing the following services:

- 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 and fitting 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 (ringing in the ears)
- Patient and family counseling about living with hearing loss
- Hearing conservation programs to prevent hearing loss
- Research and development of new evaluation techniques and rehabilitation strategies

The scope of practice for hearing aid dealers is very limited. They perform the following services:

- Rudimentary hearing tests for the purpose of selling hearing aids to adults only.
- Hearing aid fitting and sales.

Hearing aid dealers focus primarily on product sales, whereas audiologists focus on providing a high-level of patient care to ensure overall hearing health. Audiologists are educated and trained to perform a comprehensive hearing examination that will confirm or rule out the need for medical intervention.
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.

As of 2007, all new ADA Fellow members are required to have earned a Doctor of Audiology (Au.D.) clinical degree and today every ADA Fellow and Associate member holds a minimum of a Master’s Degree in audiology. ADA provides members with access to continuing education and peer-mentoring opportunities that promote clinical competency and 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
- Maintain ethical standards and practices of the Academy of Doctors of Audiology

Most 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](http://www.audiologist.org) or call (866) 493-5544 for more information or to find an ADA member audiologist in your area.
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 the majority of state-mandated health benefits. 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 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 36 million Americans with a hearing impairment to obtain more affordable treatment for hearing loss.

If passed, legislation recently introduced in the U.S. Congress 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 ear, 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 (H.R. 1882 and S. 315). Visit www.audiologist.org for more information about this important legislation and to download a template letter to send to your legislators.