

What can I expect from hearing aids?

When considering the purchase of hearing aids, it is important to establish reasonable expectations from the use of these highly sophisticated, miniature devices. The successful use of hearing aids is not merely a simple act of going to a clinic and purchasing a product. Rather, it is a complex process - one that evolves over time with the guidance and support of your audiologist.

To begin with, the hearing-impaired individual needs to acknowledge and accept that their hearing impairment has detrimental effects on interpersonal relationships and safety. Your motivation to hear well is the single most important factor in determining the success of the hearing aid fitting. It is important to realize that you will not experience exactly the same benefits from your hearing aids as your neighbour does. This individuality is a critical component, and your expectations should be based on the type and degree of your hearing loss, your lifestyle, your past experiences, and the improvements you personally receive from amplification.

Are there any "unreasonable expectations"? For the most part, there is only one unreasonable expectation - do not expect normal or perfect hearing to be restored. This guide will help you to establish realistic and reasonable expectations from your hearing aids and from your audiologist: through the process of acquiring hearing aids, adapting to them, using them effectively, maintaining them, and enjoying an improved ability to communicate in a variety of situations.

1. Expect others to notice your hearing loss before you do!

A hearing loss usually develops very gradually and people are often unaware that their hearing has changed. A common complaint of hearing-impaired individuals is that other people mumble - and if they would just speak up, it would be easier to hear them! This is placing the "blame" externally, rather than accepting the reality that your hearing is not as good as it used to be.

Acknowledge that it is your hearing. Take that step to have your hearing tested before you blast your loving spouse out of the lounge room with the blaring sound of the TV set. Seek the advice of your audiologist.

People with a hearing loss need to concentrate harder to follow a conversation than those with normal hearing, and may be unaware that they have gradually needed to put in more effort to communicate. You may notice that your hearing loss is more of a problem if you are feeling tired, sick or unwell, due to reduced concentration at those times.

2. Expect your audiologist to be knowledgeable and supportive.

Your audiologist will take a thorough case history. He/she is searching for information about your hearing loss, its probable cause, and whether there is a family pattern of hearing loss. It is important to identify any medical condition associated with your hearing loss so that an appropriate medical referral can be arranged. Your audiologist will want to know how your hearing loss has affected your communication in a variety of situations, and the impact this has had on you.

Comprehensive hearing evaluations will be conducted. These evaluations will provide information about the degree and nature of your hearing loss, as well as your ability to process and discriminate the fine sounds of speech. Poor speech discrimination results indicate that your ears are significantly distorting

sound. This is more likely to occur with more severe hearing losses. Hearing aids will restore volume but not overcome distortion. However, improved volume often does help improve clarity to a certain extent. Your audiologist will explain your results in terms of the sound quality you can expect from your hearing aids. Comfortable listening levels will be measured, as well as an evaluation of how well you tolerate loud, intense speech and other sounds. These findings are very important as they allow your audiologist to pre-set some of the characteristics of the hearing aid's circuitry.

You will have time to talk with the audiologist about the differing styles of hearing aids (in-the-ear, in-the-canal, completely-in-the-canal, behind-the-ear), the advantages and disadvantages of each style, the level of technology suitable for your hearing loss and lifestyle as well as maintenance issues and costs involved.

Approximately 80% of all hearing aids sold fit in the ear. After you, with the guidance of your audiologist, determine the best choice of hearing aid for your needs, ear impressions will be made. The ear impression is a plastic cast of your ear, recording its exact shape, so that the hearing aids can be made to fit your ears exactly.

3. Expect differing opinions.

If you choose to seek the advice of two or more audiologists, you may get differing opinions about the "best aid" for you. Everyone in the hearing aid industry acknowledges the fact that there is not a single "best" hearing aid. Rather, there are many excellent hearing aid brands available, and there are many different types of circuitry that may benefit you. Your audiologist uses the case history information and the evaluation results to make the best recommendation for you and your lifestyle.

4. Expect that you may need two hearing aids.

Expect a recommendation to purchase two hearing aids if both of your ears are hearing impaired and are "aidable." There are many benefits to binaural (two ear) hearing, including being better able to understand speech in noise, and being better able to localize sound. Your audiologist will explain the advantages of a binaural fitting versus a monaural (one ear) fitting in more detail. Nonetheless, it is very important to understand that if you have two ears with a hearing loss, and you only wear a hearing aid on one ear, you will still have significant hearing problems, even under the best of circumstances.

5. Expect an initial fitting appointment with your audiologist to learn how to handle and care for your new aids.

You should invite your spouse or significant other to attend this first critical session in getting oriented to your new aids. During this session, you will be taught how to operate the hearing aids, how to insert and remove them from your ear, how to clean them, and how to change the batteries. You will receive an instruction booklet to help you to remember all the things the audiologist tells you during this first session.

6. Expect a period of adjustment.

Once you get your new hearing aids, expect an adjustment period of several days to many weeks to get used to the daily care and maintenance of the hearing aids. You'll need time to learn how to insert and remove the hearing aids from your ears, to adjust the volume control if present (some hearing aids have

volume controls, but most have automatic volume adjustment), to clean them, to open and close the battery door, to change the battery, and to get accustomed to placing the hearing aids in a dry-aid kit for the times when they are not in your ears. There is a lot to learn, and people learn at different speeds. Go slowly, learn one thing at a time, practice, and stay in contact with your audiologist. Many times, a spouse (or significant other) is very useful in helping you adjust and handle your new hearing aids.

The largest adjustment you will go through is, of course, listening with your new hearing aids. Because your hearing loss is likely to have developed gradually over some time, your concept of what is “normal” hearing has also slowly changed. When hearing aids are fitted for the first time and sounds are boosted to the level they should be heard, your concept of “normal” hearing will need to be adjusted.

You will hear sounds that you have not heard for a long, long time. Some of these will be pleasant sounds, like the songs of the birds or high-pitched voices of children. Other less pleasant sounds need to be heard for our safety and/or general knowledge of what is happening around us. These are sounds like the refrigerator or air conditioning units humming and buzzing, the sound of our footsteps, or a “knock” in the sound of the car engine. These environmental sounds will seem unnaturally prominent or noticeable for the first few weeks. It takes time for the brain to re-learn all these sounds. Be patient! Research has shown that this adaptation or adjustment period may last a few months. For this process of adaptation to occur, you are best advised to wear your hearing aids for most of the day. If you use your hearing aids on an occasional basis you will continue to feel awkward with them, and will not adapt fully to them. Your aim is to have what you hear through the hearing aids become “normal”. This means that you will rely on your hearing aids and find it more and more difficult to cope without them. Don’t worry about this – it simply means that you have got out of the habit of concentrating hard to compensate for your hearing loss. It means that the hearing aids are now doing this work for you.

7. Expect your voice to sound different.

Your voice will sound strange to you at first - like being in a barrel, as well as quite a lot louder. This is a normal early perception and is known as the occlusion effect. This occurs as a result of your ears being blocked by the hearing aids, along with the amplification of your voice by the hearing aids. You will need to adapt to the altered sound of your own voice. If you don’t adjust to this after a few weeks, discuss it with your audiologist. Changing the vent size in your hearing aids or changing the amount of amplification you are getting for low-pitched sounds may reduce the occlusion effect. Your audiologist deals with this issue regularly, and will be able to help minimise any concerns.

8. Expect a good, comfortable fit.

Initially, it will take a while to get used to having the hearing aids in your ears. You may experience a little soreness or irritation at first, but after a few days or a week or so, you should be able to wear the aids for most of the day without any pain or discomfort. Your hearing aids are custom fitted to the exact shape of your ears. However, the many steps involved in the manufacturing process can affect the fit of the aids. If your aids are not comfortable, you should not wear them. The skin in the ear is very sensitive and will swell up if a pressure point develops. Report all discomfort or irritations to your audiologist, and **do not wear** the hearing aids until he/she advises you as to how to best address the problem.

9. Expect multiple follow-up appointments.

Digital signal processing hearing aids are highly sophisticated instruments with many features. The greatest advantage of this technology is the flexibility in programming the sound quality, as well as many other electro-acoustic characteristics of your hearing aids. This means that the hearing aids can be fine-tuned to suit your specific listening requirements.

The computer software that is used to program your hearing aids allows your audiologist to make a multitude of adjustments while the aids are in your ears. You can actually hear many of the changes as your audiologist is adjusting different features or characteristics. Some of the hearing aid features will only be noticeable in certain environments. So, be sure to tell your audiologist as much as you can about your listening experiences in many environments.

If you are a new hearing aid user, you may get an initial setting of about two-thirds of the amplification that will be ideal for you. As you get used to your aids, your audiologist will increase the amount of amplification over several visits. This will help in your adjustment period and lessen the chances of rejection due to over-amplification.

10. Expect to be able to hear well, but not perfectly, in quiet one-to-one situations and most small group settings.

When sound is comfortably loud, it will be easier for you to follow a conversation, and the effort and stress of straining to hear rapidly diminishes. Listening and communicating in social situations become pleasurable again. You should be able to hear most of what is said without having to watch a person's lips all the time.

However, people with normal hearing watch the person speaking in order to gain more information! Even when wearing the hearing aids, you should combine your vision and your hearing to maximize your benefits from the hearing aids. If everyday sounds are uncomfortably loud, report this to your audiologist immediately.

11. Expect an optimal "distance for hearing".

The best distance for hearing with your aids will be dependent on a number of factors, in particular the type of microphones in your hearing aids. The hearing aids may have either directional or omnidirectional microphones or both. Your audiologist will explain which type of microphones you have, and your effective listening range. People within this distance will be the most audible to you. Once you increase the distance from the sound you want to listen to, it will get increasingly difficult to hear - just like without the hearing aids.

12. Expect to have difficulty hearing in noisy situations.

You may say that you can hear adequately in quiet and that the noisy situations are the ones in which you need the most help. This is a common statement made by individuals who have presbycusis (hearing loss due to aging), noise-induced hearing loss, or any hearing loss where the high-pitched (or high frequency) tones are the most affected. Eventually though, as your hearing loss progresses, your ability to hear in quiet settings is also reduced.

Background noise is a nuisance for everyone, even normal hearing individuals. However, people with a high frequency hearing loss will have greater difficulty focussing on a voice when noise is present than people with normal hearing do. As sophisticated as today's technology is, hearing aids still cannot eliminate background noise for you. It makes sense to reduce or eliminate unnecessary noise if you can when having a conversation. Some of the more sophisticated digital circuitry can effectively reduce (although not eliminate) background noise. If you frequently need to communicate in noisy environments, discuss this with your audiologist when setting your goals for improvement.

13. Expect that your hearing aids may squeal (also called "whistle," or "acoustic feedback") under some circumstances.

Acoustic feedback occurs when the amplified sound coming from the hearing aid can leak out of the ear around the edge of the hearing aid and enter the microphone. If a hearing aid is working properly and has a functioning battery in it, this squeal will occur when the hearing aid is cupped in the hand. Many users find that this helps determine the status of the battery and it is a good sign! If you do not have a volume control on your aids, they will squeal when you position them in your ears - until you get them placed comfortably. The more powerful your hearing aids, the more readily they may squeal. However, you should be able to wear your hearing aids at a comfortable loudness level and not experience this squeal.

Sometimes, your hearing aids will squeal if you press the telephone too tightly to your ear, or when talking and eating, or if your ear canal is blocked with wax. Report these events to your audiologist and determine what is normal, what is abnormal, and what can be done to reduce unnecessary acoustic feedback. By blocking the ear canal, the use of hearing aids can cause wax to build up more readily. Ask your doctor to check your ears for wax build up and to arrange for wax removal when necessary.

14. Expect repairs.

Hearing aids are incredibly sophisticated devices being inserted in the ear canal where moisture and cerumen (ear wax) are present. Because of their size, hearing aids are easily dropped. Microscopic solder joints that connect the tiny wires of the microphone and receiver to the computer chip in the hearing aid can be jarred loose. Handling your hearing aid carefully, as well as establishing a good preventive maintenance routine can significantly reduce the number of repairs needed. You will be given tools to clean and absorb moisture from your hearing aid. Use them frequently! Your hearing aids will come with a repair warranty, and you can talk to your audiologist about additional warranty options when you purchase the aids. Some hearing aids include 12 months insurance against loss/non repairable damage. It is worth considering insurance for your hearing aids, as you would for a valuable item of jewellery, on your household contents insurance policy.

15. Expect to buy batteries.

Hearing aid batteries will probably last a week or two in the hearing aid. Battery life varies depending on the hearing aid circuit, the quality and type of battery, environmental conditions (temperature, humidity etc.). Some people ask why hearing aid batteries don't last as long as watch batteries. The answer is the hearing aid battery accomplishes a great deal more work, requiring much more electrical energy than does a watch battery. The information you receive during the hearing aid fitting appointment will define a reasonable length of time for your batteries. When your hearing aids are new, you might want to keep a calendar indicating the days you change batteries. Report any significant changes in battery usage to your audiologist.

There are two NEVERs with batteries:

1. NEVER keep batteries with your medicines, as you might accidentally swallow one;
2. NEVER allow young children to handle batteries, as they might swallow them. All hearing aid batteries are toxic if swallowed so keep them in a safe place.

16. Expect to purchase new hearing aids every 5 years.

This may come as a surprise, particularly if you have just purchased a set of digital hearing aids! However, hearing aid technology changes rapidly, just like computers, and improvements in technology may benefit you greatly. Some people are able to keep the same pair of hearing aids for 10 to 12 years, particularly if their hearing loss remains stable over time and if they do a great job with hearing aid maintenance, but the average life expectancy is about five years.

17. Most importantly, expect to enjoy the sounds of life again!

Your hearing aids are a key ingredient to staying active and improving the quality of your life. You will once again enjoy social events, leisure activities, and conversations with your family, friends, and co-workers, as well as complete strangers! The effort and stress of straining to hear will become past history, and you will feel much more relaxed as a result. Your hearing aids will also help you hear warning sounds to keep you safe and well.

We gratefully acknowledge that some of the information contained in this booklet is based on an article written for consumers and patients, titled "Hearing Aids: Reasonable Expectations for the Consumer." by Dr. Rose Allen. It has been edited to take account of Australian conditions and is printed with permission.