

How To Select A Hearing Aid

By Curt Hagedorn

If you remember your grandfather or other relative with a box about the size of a transistor radio in their pocket with a wire running to an earplug, hearing aids have changed a lot since then. With the rise of digitization and computerization, hearing aids have become ever smaller, and more effective – in fact, like contact lenses, there are now even disposable models. However, unless you're the kind of person who picks out a pair of reading glasses by trial and error at the local drugstore, you should really first consult with your physician and/or audiologist to make sure that you're getting the proper hearing aid for you – and to make sure that your hearing loss isn't caused by some other underlying problem. Also, since hearing can change over time, it's important that you have a relationship with a professional that can help you analyze problems and make adjustments over time as you break in the device and learn how to use it over the long term.

A hearing professional will do a variety of tests covering the full range of sounds and frequencies you may need assistance or have trouble hearing. What are called tone tests or pure tone tests measure the kind of hearing loss you might have. Speech recognition tests measure the threshold of volume where you can hear and understand speech. Finally, impedance tests help the audiologist understand the functioning of your middle ear in your overall hearing profile. Once these tests are completed, you can expect to be presented with the results of what is called "audiogram," which will tell you if there is any variation in hearing between your right or left ears, your total level of hearing loss, and at what levels or frequencies you hear best. Your potential hearing aid will then be adjusted based upon these results.

There are a number of different kinds of hearing aids available, not only in their operation but also how they're worn. Conventional hearing aids pretty much are based upon the same "transistor radio" technology of your grandfather's hearing aids. They have an analog microphone and amplifier, and a manual "volume" adjustment. The manufacturer or hearing professional can make other adjustments. Though most hearing aids are now "in ear" models, these can be somewhat larger and more obtrusive. The major advantage to this type of hearing aid is cost usually from \$300 to under \$1,000, and if your hearing loss is minor, specific to only one ear or only necessary in certain situations, say, at theatre or sporting events, an analog aid might be an adequate choice.

Computer programmable and digital hearing aids offer greater adjustability to match the specific losses outlined on your audiogram, can be customized for each individual ear, and depending

upon the kind and style you get, can be almost invisible “completely in the ear canal” models to “behind the ear” models that have certain advantages of amplification and battery life and size. By far the most popular are those which are almost completely invisible to the casual observer, though they do have some significant disadvantages in terms of not being able to accommodate major hearing loss, as well as reliability problems and just the sheer problem of say, changing a battery in something so small that is often used by the elderly. So, one of the slightly larger “in the ear canal” or “in the ear” models might make more sense for you in terms of the trade off between cosmetic appearance and performance.

Expect to pay from two to three thousand dollars or more for a quality in the ear model. Programmable features allow you to set your hearing aid for different listening environments – say “in church” or “watching television at home” – different aids offer different numbers of channels and feature. Finally there are disposable hearing aids that are usually analog models for light to moderate hearing loss. Like disposable contact lenses or those drug store reading glasses, these models can represent a significant cost savings at about \$40 a piece for about a month or so of life depending upon use, are a good way to “try out” having a hearing aid in general, but are no substitute for a professional analysis of hearing loss and a permanent hearing aid solution.