



## Patient Information

# Treatment Options for Hearing Loss

Millions of people in the United States have impaired hearing, so you are not alone if you suspect that you or someone in your family might have some degree of hearing loss.

Many treatment options are available for hearing loss. But the first step is to find out what's causing the loss. A hearing loss may be temporary and medically or surgically treatable. But in most cases, the loss is permanent, and hearing aids or other hearing enhancement devices are needed to restore the ability to hear what others are saying.

### Temporary Hearing Loss

Temporary and treatable hearing losses are usually caused by conditions in the outer or middle ear that keep sounds from reaching the tiny sensory "hair" cells of the inner ear (cilia). In turn, these cells stimulate the nerve of hearing that leads to the brain. Earwax in the outer ear canal and ear infections are common causes of temporary hearing loss. Removing the earwax or treating the infection can help restore hearing.

Also, a small bone of the middle ear can become stiff and block sounds from reaching the inner ear. This is a condition called otosclerosis. A surgeon can restore hearing by removing and replacing the stiffened bone.

### Permanent Hearing Loss

Permanent hearing losses are caused mainly by damage to the structures of the inner ear, especially the fragile hair cells that cannot be replaced. Such damage can happen at any age and may be caused by excessive noise, drugs, infections, fractures, tumors, diseases and even the aging process.

Even newborns can experience permanent hearing loss. Today, thanks to screening, such losses are usually identified before a baby leaves the hospital. Infants as young as 1 month old can be fitted with hearing aids.

Among teens and young adults, hearing is most endangered by listening to loud music. The best treatment option is a simple one: Turn down the music. In working adults, wearing ear protectors is

necessary to protect hearing when on-the-job noise is excessive. Among older adults, age-related changes lead to hearing loss in one out of three people older than 65.

### Hearing Testing

When hearing loss is suspected, an audiologist performs a hearing test to verify the loss and help determine its cause and severity. If the loss is permanent, the audiologist may suggest the use of hearing aids or other hearing enhancement devices.

### Hearing Aids

Hearing aids are electronic devices that amplify sounds into a listener's ear. They are the most popular form of hearing assistance because they are small enough to blend in with the normal ear and they are effective. Since no two hearing losses are the same, hearing aids must be carefully selected and tailored to fit the individual needs of each user.

The five major styles, listed from largest to smallest, are body, behind-the-ear, in-the-ear, in-the-canal and completely-in-the-canal hearing aids. A specific hearing aid style should be chosen for its overall benefits rather than size. If chosen well, even the smallest hearing aids can provide the user with satisfaction.

All hearing aids, regardless of size, contain a microphone for receiving sounds, an amplifier for increasing the loudness of sounds, a receiver (loudspeaker) for delivering sounds into the ear, and a battery as a power source. An on-off switch and a volume control wheel may also be included.

Special features such as remote controls, multiple programs and directional microphones are available and can be demonstrated as part of the overall fitting process.

Other hearing enhancement devices are available for people who do not use hearing aids. These include amplified telephones, personal FM systems and TV listening devices.

Hearing aids and other hearing enhancement devices should be dispensed by an audiologist as part of a complete hearing rehabilitation program. ❖

*This handout was written by Jess Dancer, a professor emeritus of audiology at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.*

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*Additional Notes:*

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