

Hearing Aids

Each year millions of Americans are diagnosed with hearing loss. For a few people, surgery may correct the problem. However, for the vast majority of people, hearing aids are the recommended treatment.

All hearing aids are individually fitted based on the individual's hearing test results. One characteristic common to all hearing aids, however, is that they have some type of mechanism that helps protect you from loud sounds and also reduces background noise.

Today, programmable hearing aids allow the medical professional assisting you to adjust and change the hearing aid characteristics on a computer right in the office. The computer chip in the programmable aid can hold two to four different programs—thus allowing the user to be able to select the hearing program that is most comfortable and clear for each listening environment.

One challenge is to distinguish between background “noise” and desirable sounds. Unfortunately, sounds that may be considered to be “noise” are often located in the same frequency range as desirable speech sounds. Therefore, there is a tradeoff in limiting the noise in return for hearing the desirable sounds.

A recent advance in technology, however, has brought us the digital hearing aid. This technology allows for sound to become digitized, allowing for more complex processing. The end result of this is that digital hearing aids are smart enough to significantly reduce—but not eliminate—unwanted background noise. They are, however, expensive.

To determine whether you are a candidate for the use of a hearing aid, you should request a referral from your physician to see an audiologist. The audiologist is a hearing specialist who will provide you with a hearing test and will recommend the type of hearing aid that is most appropriate for your needs.

The degree and type of hearing loss you have, the size of your ear canal, and the type of listening situations you are most often in, all help to determine which type of hearing aid is best for you. While cosmetic appearances are a natural concern for many people, you should know that small, less-visible hearing aids can be difficult to manipulate and may not be as easy to use and control. You'll want to discuss all of these concerns with the audiologist.

If you have hearing loss in both ears, it's very important to wear a hearing aid in each ear. This is referred to as binaural amplification and is advised by most hearing medical professionals. Research studies indicate that wearing two hearing aids is necessary to clearly understand speech, to locate sources of sound, and to deliver a more natural sound quality.

It is very important to be a good consumer when you go to purchase a hearing aid. California consumer protection acts entitle you to a 30 day trial period for all hearing aid products. Furthermore, the law states that you must be provided with a written contract that guarantees a refund if you are not completely satisfied.

Finally, if you have just been fitted with a hearing aid, you should know that there will be an adjustment period before you become comfortable with it. Like anything that is new in your life, there will be a break-in period.

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For more health information ...

- Connect to our Web site at *members.kp.org*
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit your facility's Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.