

Hearing Loss

Treatment options for this common condition COMPILED BY JESS DANCER, EdD

Millions of people in the U.S. have impaired hearing, so you are not alone if you suspect you or someone in your family might have hearing loss.

The first step is to find out what is causing the loss. If it is a temporary loss, it may be treated by medicine or surgery. But, in most cases, the loss is permanent and hearing aids or other devices are needed to restore the ability to hear what others are saying.

Temporary Hearing Loss

Temporary 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). Ear wax and ear infections are common causes of temporary hearing loss. Removing the ear wax or treating the infection can help restore hearing.

Another cause is a condition called otosclerosis. This is when a small bone of the middle ear becomes stiff and blocks sounds from reaching the inner ear. A surgeon can restore hearing by removing and replacing the stiffened bone.

Permanent Hearing Loss

Permanent hearing loss is 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 of age can be fit with hearing aids.

Among teens and young adults, hearing can be harmed 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 extreme. Among older adults, age-related changes lead to hearing loss in one out of three people older than 65.

The purpose of this patient education handout is to further explain or remind you about a medical condition. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, be sure to discuss them with your healthcare provider. This handout may be reproduced for distribution to patients.



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 work. Since no two hearing losses are the same, hearing aids must be carefully selected to fit your needs.

The five major styles of hearing aids, listed from largest to smallest, are body, behind-the-ear, in-the-ear, in-the-canal and completely-in-the-canal.

Each style has advantages and disadvantages. 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 also may be included.

Special features such as remote controls, multiple programs and directional microphones are available. A healthcare professional will help you choose what’s best for you.

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, a person who specializes in hearing care, as part of a complete hearing rehabilitation program. ■

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