

BUYING HEARING AIDS IN AUSTRALIA - WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

Buying hearing aids is a big decision - it is also an intimidating prospect for someone new to the process. We are fortunate to live in a world where we have access to so much information. Unfortunately, this can lead to confusion. These days people receive information about hearing aids in their letter boxes, in magazines, newspapers, on the TV, on the radio and online. You may receive marketing calls offering free hearing assessments.....but is anything really free?

First of all, unlike other purchases, buying hearing aids is a process. During that process, you will face information that is technical in nature, which can be confusing and create uncertainty. Much of the information is technical jargon and difficult to understand. This information is designed to make the journey easier for you and your family and guide you through the process.

The selection of hearing aids is only one part of this process. To achieve the best outcomes, you require a detailed diagnostic assessment of your hearing loss, an assessment of your communication needs and thorough follow-up rehabilitative support. This allows the hearing aids to be accurately fine-tuned to your hearing loss and communication requirements, as well as supporting you while you adapt to amplification.

Step 1: The process of gaining knowledge: be informed

There are now three major multi-national conglomerates, who between them control over 80% of the world's manufacture of hearing aids. The competitive market ensures that hearing aid technology is continually evolving with regards to speech in noise processing and connectivity to other devices such as TV, mobile phones etc. A broad range of hearing aids is available, with seven major companies to choose from in Australia.

If you read their websites, most of them will suggest that if you lead an active lifestyle you will need to purchase premium devices to obtain good results in all situations.

Hearing aid marketing: what is the difference between hearing aid technology levels?

Hearing aid technology levels are set by the manufacturers to separate hearing aids into different performance and price categories. These differences are largely based on noise processing features - the ability to detect and highlight a dominant speech sound in a noisy environment. Despite some of the marketing claims, no hearing aids can fully separate a voice from background noise or other voices.

Hearing aids can be roughly divided into four levels:

Essential Level: This is the first level of technology that is offered. These aids are automatic, but are described as having limited noise processing capabilities.

Basic Level: This is a step above the Essential level and includes more automatic features and a little more noise processing.

Advanced Level: They have sophisticated noise processing, but lack some of the cutting-edge features of the current generation of premium models.

Premium Level: This is the best that a manufacturer currently has available. It contains all the top end features.

Is One Technology Level Better Than Another?

An essential level hearing aid is no different in size or appearance and has the same internal parts as the premium level. The difference is that the manufacturer's software removes a lot of the features found in the premium level. Whether these features make a great deal of difference to the overall benefit obtained from using the hearing aid is arguable, as some independent researchers have found.

A recent independent study, by Professor Robyn Cox (School of Communication Sciences and Disorders, University of Memphis, Memphis, Tenn., USA) examined contemporary hearing aids from two of the major manufacturers:

‘Subjects obtained as much improvement in speech understanding and quality of life from the lower-cost basic-level instruments as from the higher-cost premium-level instruments’ (ref: Impact of Advanced Hearing Aid Technology on Speech Understanding for Older Listeners with Mild to Moderate, Adult-Onset, Sensorineural Hearing Loss Cox R.M. · Johnson J.A. · Xu J. Gerontology 2014; 60:557-568.)

All participants in the study reacted very positively to the benefits derived from wearing modern hearing aids. Both everyday speech understanding and quality of life were substantially improved with hearing aids. Results for both new and experienced users showed no statistically significant or clinically important differences in improvement between the premium and basic-level hearing aids.

‘The knowledge and skills required to program, fit, and fine-tune modern hearing aids are highly specialized. Professional services that follow best-practice protocols are time-consuming, but they are essential to securing an optimal outcome for each patient, no matter which feature level is recommended’. (Robyn Cox, 2014)

Step 2: The process of seeking hearing health care

Hearing loss usually develops very gradually, and people are often unaware that their hearing is changing. It tends to be those close to you who will first notice the change in your communication ability, the additional effort required in conversation, and the impact this is having on your quality of life.

People with a hearing loss need to concentrate harder to follow a conversation than those with normal hearing. Hearing loss is therefore more of a problem when you are feeling tired, sick or unwell, due to reduced concentration at those times. It is common for a hearing loss to be first identified during a period of high stress or poor health. Other associated symptoms can often emerge such as tinnitus and reduced tolerance of loud sounds.

If your inability to understand speech clearly is getting to the stage that it is having an impact on your enjoyment of life, it is time to get hearing aids. Recognise there is a difference between going somewhere to buy a product and going somewhere for comprehensive patient centred care.

Before visiting a hearing clinic, you should discuss your hearing concerns with your doctor to make sure that your hearing has not been affected by a treatable medical condition. You may wish to arrange for a trusted friend or relative to join you at your hearing clinic appointment.

Choosing the right hearing professional

Practitioners may be audiometrists who hold TAFE diploma qualifications or university-trained audiologists. In Australia, to be an accredited audiologist, you need at least a Masters' degree in Audiology, be guided by a code of professional conduct and engage in ongoing professional education. Be aware though that there is no formal regulation of the minimum level of training required by hearing aid dispensers in Australia. Providers can be business owners without clinical qualifications in audiology or audiometry and so need not belong to any professional body that sets rules of conduct.

Hearing health care is not just another service industry. It is characterized by people taking care of others in times of need and stress. Stable, trusting, long term relationships between a patient and their audiologist are critical to ensuring a positive outcome.

It is not correct to consider that modern hearing aids need minimal service and adjustments compared to older hearing technology. Despite the rapidly changing improvements in hearing aid technology, too many hearing aids sit in a drawer, often with disappointment at the level of benefit obtained. Hearing aid technology and programming software have become increasingly sophisticated, so that the skills required by the clinician fine-tuning hearing aids for a personalised, optimal result have substantially increased.

The Skills and Experience of the Audiology Team are More Important than the Price of the Hearing Aid.

At DWM Audiology, we provide a patient and family centred service which is respectful and responsive to individual patient preferences, needs and values. We believe that our patients should be given the necessary information and opportunity to exercise the degree of control they choose over their hearing and communication health care decisions.

Step 3 The diagnostic process: what to expect from the first appointment

The Hearing Assessment

The hearing assessment is the foundation of the process. It needs to be done accurately and thoroughly. A comprehensive assessment is the basis of any recommendation your audiologist will make. The hearing aid is programmed from the test results, so the more detailed the test, the more closely the hearing aid will match your hearing loss.

During the consultation, it is important that the audiologist gets a clear understanding of your lifestyle and the impact that your hearing loss is having. With this information they can make good recommendations for you, your hearing loss and your lifestyle needs.

What should happen at a hearing assessment?

The hearing assessment involves an ear examination, case history, lifestyle and communication needs assessment, audiometry, speech discrimination testing and an analysis of middle ear function.

During the assessment procedure, you can expect a full explanation of all of the tests undertaken and why they are being carried out.

4. The hearing aid selection process: what can I expect from hearing aids?

Hearing aids provide the required level of frequency-specific amplification to compensate for the loss of volume resulting from a hearing loss. They will automatically adapt to suit different sounds and different listening environments.

They have become highly sophisticated, miniature devices – but they do not solve all hearing problems - they are aids, not a cure. Technology alone cannot totally overcome the perceptual distortions produced from the most common form of hearing loss- an inner ear (or sensorineural) hearing loss.

If you are considering the purchase of hearing aids, it is important to establish reasonable expectations from the use of these devices. Your audiologist, after a full assessment of your audiological needs, will be able to guide you through this process.

Inner ear damage and neural changes with a significant sensorineural hearing loss will cause a loss of clarity, so that hearing of speech will be distorted. Hearing aids provide a clear undistorted sound **to** your ears, but the sound is distorted as it passes **through** the ears and neural pathways.

This distortion reduces the ability to discriminate speech through competing noise. Contemporary hearing aids help highlight a dominant speech sound but cannot fully separate a voice the person wants to hear from other voices. Additionally, effective localisation of sound is often impaired, so rapid communication in a large group where the person cannot source who is speaking is challenging, even with optimally fitted hearing aids.

You should be made aware of the advantages and limitations of hearing aid use with your hearing loss – both generally, as well as with your specific hearing aid choice.

Which hearing aid is right for me?

People who rarely communicate in groups or significant levels of background noise may not need a sophisticated and expensive level of hearing aid technology. The level of technological sophistication should be matched to your communication needs and budget. Cosmetic concerns, ease of handling/dexterity and degree of hearing loss will influence the choice of

size and appearance of the hearing aids. Inappropriate hearing aid choice can increase the level of hearing disability if you cannot manage the complexity or size of your hearing aids.

During your appointment:

1. Ask your audiologist to **explain your audiogram graph and results** so that you understand your hearing loss.
2. Ask your audiologist to **discuss the range of** hearing aids and devices available.
3. Ask your audiologist about the different features of the hearing aid. **While some hearing aids may have more features or functions than others**, you may not need or want them.
4. If your audiologist recommends a hearing aid, **ask why**. If you don't understand anything, ask for clarification until you do understand. You have the right to ask your audiologist if they are paid more to sell particular hearing aids, or why they only sell certain brands or types of hearing aids.
5. **Take notes** if you think you may have trouble remembering important details (or ask your support person to take notes for you).
6. **Ask for a copy** of your hearing test results, including the audiogram.
7. **Ask for a quote**, including the type and cost of any recommended hearing aid and whether the cost includes consultations after fitting.
8. Find out if the hearing clinic offers **a trial period**. Be sure to ask for the conditions of any trial period, including its end date.
9. Take your time to make a decision and **remember it's ok to say no**. You should never feel pressured or rushed into making a decision and you do not have to agree to anything on the spot.

Will I get a Medicare rebate on my hearing assessment?

Patients can be referred to an audiologist under a Chronic Disease Management plan to receive a rebate from Medicare. For those who require GP referral to an ENT specialist or

Neurologist, Medicare rebates are available for audiological assessment – either by the specialist practice or by an independent audiologist at the specialist's request.

How much should hearing aids cost?

There is no recommended retail price on hearing aids, and each provider is free to charge what they wish. The price charged normally depends on the level of services provided. With hearing aids, the cheapest option may not be the best option. Having said that, the most expensive option might not be either. Do your research, look at the price range, the services included and research the reputation of the clinic. As a small independent private practice, we are not the cheapest provider of hearing aids in Australia. Nor are we the most expensive.

A significant component of the cost of hearing aid fitting is the rehabilitative support and maintenance programs that are required to achieve optimal aided benefit and to keep the hearing aids working at their optimal efficiency.

5. The rehabilitation process: The importance of purchasing a device + hearing rehabilitation vs purchasing a device alone

The aim of hearing rehabilitation is to improve your quality of life through optimising hearing function and communication ability. Communication is a complex process. A diverse range of personal factors and auditory problems drive the need for hearing rehabilitation for each individual – your communication style, abilities, social and physical contexts, and communication preferences.

An effective aural rehabilitation program will include a detailed assessment of your auditory function and communication issues, counselling in hearing and communication strategies, amplification strategies such as hearing aids and alternative listening devices and close

professional support while you go through the process of adjustment to amplification from hearing aids.

Experience has taught us that successful use of hearing aids is therefore not merely a simple act of going to a clinic and purchasing a product. Rather, it is a process that evolves over time with the guidance and support of your audiologist.

The benefits of post fitting support

The benefits of constant hearing aid use:

At DWM Audiology we have always strongly encouraged our patients to wear their devices as much as possible each day. There is strong science behind that recommendation based on multiple studies.

The slow progression of a hearing loss results in brain rewiring:

Losing our hearing typically occurs very slowly over a period of years. The insidious nature of this change means that various sounds in our environment become softer and softer until, in many cases, they are no longer heard.

Gradually these missing sounds include more and more of the consonant sounds of speech. The brain starts to "forget" that these sounds exist and starts to rewire, focussing on those sounds that remain – doing the best it can with what's left.

The longer the brain experiences this form of sound desensitisation, the more "cemented" the brain's rewiring process becomes. Delaying hearing aid fitting greatly affects the ability to adapt to and benefit from hearing aid amplification, particularly during the initial days and weeks of hearing aid use.

Rewiring your dormant pathways by consistent hearing aid use:

The good news is, just as the brain rewires to adapt to a hearing loss, it will also rewire to the signals sent by a hearing aid. However, this process takes some persistence, patience and time.

Because your hearing loss is likely to have developed gradually, your concept of “normal” hearing has slowly changed. The processing of sound in the brain includes the subconscious selection and highlighting of sounds that are important to us. Unimportant sounds are heard, but not fully perceived, unless we deliberately focus on them.

With an initial hearing aid fitting, there will be many sounds to readjust to, your concept of “normal” hearing will need to be redefined and the process of subconscious selection will need to be re-learned, which can take up to several months. In particular, unimportant sounds will seem both loud and unnaturally prominent through your hearing aids at first. We have found these issues to be a major reason for hearing aid rejection in an unprepared patient and rehabilitative guidance/support during this period is essential for successful hearing aid fitting.

Gradually being eased towards the level of optimum amplification for your hearing loss will help your brain rewire gently. Wearing your hearing aids most of the time will ensure that your concept of “normal” hearing will be successfully redefined and you will automatically relearn to tune away unimportant sounds. Our most successful patients wear their hearing aids 12-16 hours per day.

It takes an experienced clinician to decide whether any difficulties are due to the need for adjustment of your hearing aid programming or are due to the process of relearning - requiring "brain adjustment" time.

During that period, it helps to have expert professional advice regularly available to make hearing aid adjustments and provide skilled, empathetic support.

6. Other bits and pieces that are good to know

Hearing aids are expensive items and it is important that all of the financial details are very clear. Your audiologist should provide you with a written agreement. The agreement should cover the cost of the hearing aids, the length of the trial period, the money back

guarantees, the included warranty and any long-term service and back-up you are entitled to.

What are Money Back Guarantees?

Most privately purchased hearing aids are supplied under a money back period or guarantee. This allows you to make a decision about the aids during a set period when they can be exchanged or returned and your money refunded. The length of this trial period and the amount of money that is returned varies from company to company. Prior to purchase, your audiologist should provide you with written information covering the following:

- The cost of the hearing aid
- The services and number of follow-up visits included in the cost
- Money Back Guarantee and refund policy
- Money Back period, return time limits
- Fees charged if the hearing aid(s) are returned within the trial period
- Whether the trial period is extended if the aid breaks down during the trial period and needs to be returned for repairs

What should be on your purchase agreement?

Your purchase agreement should cover all the terms and conditions and the ongoing services to be provided. It should cover the above points plus:

- Date of sale
- Information on the product warranties provided by the hearing device manufacturer
- Hearing aid insurance details included in the package

Will I get a rebate from my private health insurance fund?

You may be eligible for a rebate for your hearing aids from your Private Health fund. It is important for individuals to contact their health fund to check which benefits apply to them.

IAA link: <https://independentaudiologists.net.au/Private-Health-Funds>

What ongoing costs will I be looking at?

- If your hearing aids are not rechargeable and require a battery you will need to purchase these as needed. They need to be fresh and good quality so are best bought from a hearing clinic or sourced online.
- Break downs are inevitable and repair costs will vary depending on the problem and the warranty period.
- Annual hearing assessments are best practice to monitor your hearing loss and ensure programming of the hearing aids keeps matching any change in your hearing levels.

Insurance for Hearing Aids

All hearing aid manufacturers should provide a 12 month loss and damage policy from initial purchase. After this period we recommend adding the device/s onto your house and contents policy. Also ensure the device/s are covered if you travel.

7. The Importance of Hearing Aid Maintenance

Hearing aids are delicate devices. Ongoing and readily accessible maintenance support is essential.

Maintaining your hearing aids through daily cleaning and regular service is extremely important. The environment for in-the-ear hearing aids is moist and warm. Skin and wax can accumulate in the ears and on your hearing aid.

Wax build-up and the amount of moisture present in ear canals varies widely from person to person. Not surprisingly, these conditions can be harmful to electronics. Your activity level and climatic conditions in which hearing aids are worn will affect moisture build-up. People with high levels of physical activity or who perspire easily can be more prone to moisture problems than those who lead a more sedentary life. A moisture problem can be further aggravated by conditions of high humidity and rain. Proper hearing aid care helps retain optimum hearing conditions, extends the life of your hearing aid, and ensures healthy ear hygiene.

Tips for cleaning your hearing aids:

- **Remove wax.** It is important to remove wax from your hearing aid and ear tips/ear moulds to prevent temporary malfunction or permanent damage. When you purchase your hearing aids, you should receive cleaning tools including a soft brush and small picks or loops. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for cleaning your hearing aids. If you cannot remove all the wax, your hearing professional can help.
- **When you remove your hearing aids at night, wipe them with a tissue or dry soft cloth.** Do not use water, alcohol swabs or cleaning solvents as they can break down or damage your hearing aids.
- **Use a dehumidifier overnight.**

Don't drop your hearing aids

Dropping your hearing aids on a hard surface can damage the instruments. When you're handling your hearing aids, do it from a seated position at a table or with a towel or pillow on your lap.

Proper storage

- When not in use, keep your hearing aids away from heat and moisture and store them in a dry, cool place. Preferably using a dehumidifying container for storage. These are designed to safely and effectively remove moisture that can corrode sensitive circuitry.
- Leave the battery door open to preserve battery power when not in use.

When not to wear your hearing aids

While most new hearing aids today are designed for water resistance, don't wear your hearing aids:

- in the shower or sauna
- swimming
- when using a hair dryer

- while applying hair spray or other types of spray on products. Apply hair products first, and then insert your hearing aids.

Our maintenance program

All clients who have chosen to have their rehabilitation program with DWM Audiology have access to a free hearing aid maintenance and cleaning service. This is a “walk-in”, no appointment required service that operates Mon-Fri. This service includes:

- a vacuum chamber for moisture control
- suction equipment, designed for hearing aids, to clean dirt from the small openings
- an ultrasonic unit for mould cleaning
- minor hearing aid repairs

8. Buying hearing aids online

Choosing a device online to assist with any health-related treatment is not ideal. Purchasing hearing aids online without a professional assessment may initially cost you less.... however, what underpins a successful hearing rehabilitation program has been omitted. The consultation fee you will pay for professional advice from an audiologist to discuss appropriate treatment options for your hearing loss could prevent you from spending thousands of dollars on hearing aids that are not suitable for you.

It is vital people have a good understanding of their hearing loss prior to purchasing hearing aids. Audiologists will perform a number of tests to diagnose hearing disorders, understand the characteristics of your hearing loss and assess your individual communication requirements. They will use this information to help you make decisions regarding the most appropriate solution for your hearing needs. It takes time and training for the brain to learn how to interpret sounds that it has not heard for a long time. In addition to the prescription and personalised fine-tuning of hearing aids audiologists provide ongoing support, counselling and communication training to ensure people get the best outcomes from their

hearing aids. An online process is not able to provide any of these essential professional services.

9. Accessories For Hearing Aids

There are many accessories compatible with hearing aids that may make life easier for you. There are a number of things to keep in mind when considering an accessory. Firstly, do you really need it? Will it make your life easier or will it be another item you need to remember to take with you? Current technology enables you to stream mobile phone calls directly to your hearing aids, control the direction of the microphone focus and make volume changes without needing to touch the devices. However, all hearing aids these days automatically calculate volume and adapt to different listening environments - *and therefore* in most circumstances people do not need to make any adjustments.

Always ask your provider if a trial period applies to an accessory in case you find it doesn't suit you. If you are considering hearing aids for the first time, having an accessory fitted at the hearing aid fitting appointment is not always ideal. There is a lot to take in and remember at the hearing aid fitting appointment. It is better to first master the management of your hearing aids and give yourself time to assess your need for an accessory.

The following list briefly describes different accessories that are available.

- **Bluetooth hearing aids and streamers:** Bluetooth compatible hearing aids allow streaming of phone calls, music and other media from your smart phone to your hearing aids. Some models require a streamer which is worn around your neck and picks up your voice. More recent models can connect directly with your smart phone. Bluetooth hearing aids and streamers can be a bit temperamental and do require wearers to be "tech savvy" to some degree.
- **Rechargeable hearing aids:** Recent developments in rechargeable battery technology allows rechargeable hearing aids to provide up to 24 hours of continuous use, even with audio streaming. Rechargeable hearing aids can be much easier to handle for people with vision or dexterity issues. They are a more sustainable choice for our environment than disposable batteries. Rechargeable hearing aids require

regular charging (every night) and if the battery runs out when you are out and about you will be without amplification until it is sufficiently charged.

- **Remote controls:** allow volume and programs to be adjusted without having to touch your hearing aids.
- **Smart Phone apps:** Free apps are available from some manufacturers which enable adjustments to the volume, program and even the direction of the microphone's focus in some models. They tend to be available in the mid to top range of hearing aids and only in the latest models.
- **Remote microphones and FM systems:** A remote mic or FM unit is a wireless device that allows hearing aid wearers to pick up the voice of an individual despite adverse listening conditions, such as in noisy environments or over distance. A microphone is worn by the person the hearing aid wearer wishes to hear and their voice is transmitted wirelessly to the hearing aid wearer. Remote mics/FM systems are commonly used in lectures, by couples when at restaurants, in the car etc.
- **Dehumidifier:** An inexpensive but effective way to help protect and extend the life of your hearing aids. There are two main types, a static type or an electronic. The static style employs silica crystals which absorb moisture when left in an airtight container overnight. The Electronic version uses a heater and a fan to dry the hearing aids overnight and some also have UV light to help sterilise the aids.

10. HSP Eligibility

In Australia, a Hearing Services Program is provided and administered by the Home Support & Hearing Branch / In Home Aged Care Division Department of Health. This program funds hearing assessments and hearing aid fitting/maintenance vouchers to eligible people.

Eligible persons hold a Pensioner Concession Card, or are a member of the Australian Defence Force, or are a National Disability Insurance Scheme participant with hearing needs referred by a planner from the National Disability Insurance Agency. Full details on eligibility: www.hearingservices.gov.au.