



Best Practices in Hearing Enhancement

Shop for an Audiologist - Not a Hearing Aid Brand

Many people shop for a brand of hearing aid, thinking one is better than the other. You might be surprised to know that, when programmed in an identical manner, major brands will perform very similarly. However, when programmed poorly, the best brand will sound terrible and make you wonder why you even bothered.

What you should shop for is an audiologist. Look for someone who can function as a hearing enhancement coach and problem-solver. **He or she will test your hearing thoroughly to determine its nature and to ensure that there are no medical issues that need to be addressed.** Speech recognition testing will also be performed to determine how well you understand speech, not only in quiet but also in noisy situations. A commonly used speech-in noise (SIN) test is called the QuickSin. As the name suggests, it's a quick way of estimating how you will function in noisy environments, and determining if you might need assistive listening devices in addition to directional technology to help you understand better in challenging situations such as noise, reverberation, and distance (or all three). The audiologist should also ask you about your listening and lifestyle needs since formal tests do not always reveal each person's particular hearing challenges.

After your audiologist has determined your residual hearing aid listening needs, then the process of selecting your individualized hearing enhancement solution begins. This solution will consist of some combination of technology and training. It could be as simple as hearing aids and some instructive counseling. It might be as intricate as hearing aids, telecoils, and assistive listening devices, as well as training in more communication strategies. How simple or involved depends upon your particular needs.

The next step is the programming and verification of the hearing aids. Each hearing aid is programmed using software provided by the manufacturer. **Adjustments are made to meet certain fitting targets established by a large body of audiologic research.** The purpose of fitting targets is to provide you with the audibility and listening comfort that you need. Best practice documents recommend that a small flexible microphone be placed in your ear to determine the output of the hearing aid while it is in your ear. Measurements are taken by presenting speech signals at different loudness levels. **Through additional computer programming, the hearing aids are then adjusted at each level to optimize speech understanding and listening comfort and verify that the hearing aids are meeting target as closely as possible.**

This process is the only way to objectively determine what Sound Pressure Levels (SPLs) the hearing aid is delivering to your eardrum and to verify that the fitting is a good one.

Probe-microphone testing also provides a baseline for comparison when you return for adjustments and is also used to compare performance if your hearing aid malfunctions. Before you make an appointment to be fitted with hearing aids, always ask if the audiologist uses probe-mic (or real ear) testing to verify a hearing aid fitting.

After the hearing aid fitting has been verified, you should be instructed in the care and use of the hearing aids. This process should involve your significant other as well. The ultimate success of the hearing aid fitting could depend upon how much information you are able to recall from the orientation process so feel free to ask questions and take notes and call the office if you have any questions. ***Remember, it's all about YOU and your happiness.***

People are often shocked to learn all of their listening needs might not necessarily be met with premium or even mid-level hearing aids. I often hear this question: "You mean the hearing aids won't help me in all situations and I have to buy even more equipment?"

The answer is: "Yes, I am recommending a customized 'total communication solution'—one that will enable you to hear not only in quiet, but also in situations having poor acoustics. So, to have that good result, we need to use additional technologies." Designing a total communication solution for each person takes time and requires a certain expertise.

Once you walk out of the door with your new hearing aids, you are not done. The next few weeks involve a validation process: Does the hearing aid fitting help or not? You might be wearing hearing aids or you might be wearing hearing aids and assistive listening devices. It all depends on your needs and what you and your audiologist decide is best. In the first weeks you should keep a log of your experiences so that you can return to your audiologist or adjustments/counseling if necessary.

There will be an adjustment period of six weeks on average, and you will need to be patient but, if after a good try, you feel something isn't right, then it probably isn't, so be assertive. However, if best practices are followed—for example, your audiologist takes the time to listen to your concerns, verifies and validates, then most likely you will keep the technology recommended because it is helping you to meet your receptive communication needs. ***Research has shown that the use of hearing aids improves quality of life in many areas including relationships at home, self-confidence, mental health, safety and social life.***

Depending on the nature of your hearing loss, you might need additional training (rehabilitative audiology) to help you better hear and understand with your new technology. ***You might also want to inquire about self-guided, computer-based auditory training programs, such as LACE*** (Listening and Communication Enhancement), which like "physical therapy for the auditory system." This involves listening to speech in noise, competing talkers, and fast talkers for 20 minutes a day, three times a week. Studies show that LACE can provide a 30-40% improvement in understanding speech in the presence of background noise. Achieving your best possible hearing takes time, and your audiologist will be with you every step of the way.