

## **Free Hearing Aids for Pensioners**

If you have a Pensioner Concession Card, certain Veterans Affairs cards, or receive Sickness Allowance from Centrelink, you are eligible for free hearing aids. You firstly need to see your GP to be referred to the Australian Government Hearing Services Program. The program will provide a hearing services Voucher which you can then take to an Australian Hearing centre or another hearing services provider.



There is a range of free aids which your audiologist/audiometrist can discuss with you. Aids may be Behind the Ear aids, In the Ear aids or In the Canal aids, and may differ in features, amount of power, ability to be programmed and ease of use. If you want additional features not provided in the free aids, you can choose a 'Top-Up' arrangement where you pay the difference in cost to your service provider.

Particularly if you have a Top-Up aid, ask your hearing services provider if you can have a trial period of 30 days or more.

For more information, phone the Office of Hearing Services on: 1800 500 726.

If you are not eligible for free hearing aids, you might find the following information useful.

## **Hearing Aids – A Senior's Experience**

### **Part I: Buying a hearing aid**

Buying hearing aids can be an expensive, confusing and time-consuming process, I have discovered, particularly as I was not eligible for free aids from the Australian Government.

Even getting a hearing test was a learning experience. The Seniors Card Discount Directory has companies offering free hearing tests, screening or checks. However, while these *may* be a complete hearing test, some of them will only tell you that you have a hearing loss, and you would still need to get a complete hearing test, which takes a half hour or more, and which could range from free to \$100. Audiologists don't seem to want to accept other companies' tests, so I ended up having three tests, two of which I paid for, and getting quotes from each of the companies, as well as phoning a couple of other companies to see if they had the brands that I was considering buying. Some hearing companies deal with a lot of different brands, some only deal with one brand.

Some important things I learnt were:

- Shop around – aids can cost between \$500 and \$10 000. I found one audiologist selling a particular aid for about \$5,000, while another had the same aid, with the same services included, for \$3750. Also, you might like to consider how you get on with the audiologist – you want someone you feel comfortable with when you return for follow-up visits, and with whom you can discuss any hearing aid problems.

- Make sure you are able to have a trial period, usually 30 or 60 days. If you are not happy then, you can try a different aid or get your money back (but do see an audiologist/audiometrist during the trial period for adjustments).
- If you have hearing loss in both ears, it is recommended that you buy two aids.
- Think about Behind the Ear (BTE) aids as opposed to In the Ear or In the Canal aids. I decided on BTE aids because they have fewer problems with wax and water and thus generally last rather longer, they can be more powerful I believe, and also, because they are larger they may have more features than some of the smaller aids. However, BTE aids are more visible if you don't have hair that covers them.
- Work out what features you want – e.g. volume control, directional microphone, Telecoil (also known as a T switch, useful in some theatres, churches, etc). Also, many hearing aids have 'tracking systems' which enable the audiologist to check your usage of the aids (how often, in what situations, any noise feedback etc), which is very useful information for the audiologist in making adjustments.
- Once you have your hearing aids, make follow-up visits to your audiologist, and be patient and persistent with your new hearing aids as it can take time to get used to them.



To obtain more information on hearing loss and hearing aids, you might try:

- Article in Choice Magazine, July 2006. Also, Choice has an excellent, more comprehensive article from Jan/Feb 1999, although some of the section on 'Features' is dated.
- Information sheets from SHHH (Self Help for Hard of Hearing People) at [www.shhhaust.org/NewInfo.html](http://www.shhhaust.org/NewInfo.html) or phone (02) 9144 7586.
- Brochures from Australian Hearing - phone 1800 826 500 or download from [www.hearing.com.au/fact-sheets](http://www.hearing.com.au/fact-sheets) (under General Publications). Also check their Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).
- Phone Better Hearing Australia at (07) 3844 5065
- Research manufacturers of hearing aids on the internet. This can be time-consuming, trying to find enough detailed information to compare hearing aids and their features.
- Finally, take a list of questions to the audiologist for further clarification.

## **Hearing Aids – A senior's story continues**

### **Part II: Using a hearing aid**

After buying my hearing aids and using them for 8 weeks, I'd like to pass on some of my experiences. I ended up buying cheaper aids, \$1200 each (introductory price on a new model, and including seniors' discount) for Behind the Ear aids which had enough of the features I wanted.

Too often, hearing aids, even expensive ones, end up sitting in a drawer – I was determined this wouldn't happen with something that is so costly. **The two most important things I have found are: firstly, to be persistent and patient, wearing the aids as much as possible, and secondly to go back to the audiologist with any problems at all.**

My experiences:

- Sounds were very much louder: a tap running, footsteps, birds singing, plastic bags crackling and the rustling of paper were the things I first noticed when I tried the hearing aids in my home. Some of these were quite annoying for a while, but now they have faded into background noise as my ears have adjusted. Recently I walked under a tree at South Brisbane, and heard so much noise from a flock of birds that I stopped to listen; then I took out my hearing aids and was met with silence; the racket resumed immediately on putting the aids back in – I found this an amazing example of how much high frequency hearing loss I (and probably many other seniors) have been living with.
- The first time I drove my car was scarily noisy, and my first trip to a shopping centre was also incredibly noisy, but again, my ears have adjusted to these noises – even with normal hearing, we block out a lot of background noise.
- I have found myself asking people to repeat things far less often. People at work have commented on how much more I am hearing, and meetings are far more comfortable. I can also participate much more easily in dinner table conversations - I have realised that I was isolating myself somewhat because of my hearing problem.
- I now have the radio, music and TV at lower levels.
- There have been some downsides – the type of aid I chose allows in a lot of natural sound, which I wanted, but this apparently means there is more whistling at times, although with the feedback cancellation feature, this stops fairly quickly. (Later addition: changes to my earmoulds have reduced the whistling so that it is only noticeable if I put my hand over the hearing aid.)
- The hearing aids were somewhat uncomfortable, so I have had several trips back to the audiologist, firstly to have a different mould attached (the plastic part which goes in the ear), secondly to have custom moulds made, which also reduced the whistling, and thirdly to have the custom moulds sanded down to make them slightly smaller. They are now much more comfortable, so that generally I don't remember I'm wearing hearing aids.
- Another problem was a very noisy Christmas gathering which was overwhelming with the hearing aids, and when I was glad to have volume control as a feature.
- Regular cleaning is necessary to stop wax build-up, but this soon becomes a routine.
- Hearing aids are generally set at a moderate or 'novice' level at first. After maybe 6 months, the audiologist/audiometrist can adjust the aids so that sounds are more highly amplified.

Hearing aids can't make hearing perfect - I still don't hear as well as people with good hearing. However the improvement is wonderful.