

HEARING AID INFORMATION

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 a referral to the Australian Government Hearing Services Program: forms can be obtained from your doctor, or by phoning the Office of Hearing Services on 1800 500 726. The program will provide information as well as a hearing services voucher which you can then take to an Australian Hearing centre or another hearing services provider that is contracted with the Office of Hearing Services.

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 (e.g. Bluetooth), you can choose a 'Top-Up' arrangement where you pay the difference in cost to your service provider. These additional features may be helpful but are considered extra to those necessary to meet your hearing goals. It is best to obtain a written quote for the hearing devices and on-going maintenance costs before committing to extra costs. However, the free hearing aids are of high quality and are generally all you need.

Maintaining your hearing device and buying batteries can be costly. An easy way to take care of your hearing device is to enter into a maintenance agreement with your hearing practitioner where, for an annual fee, usually just over \$40 (current in March 2014), your hearing practitioner will supply batteries and service and repair your free hearing device for 12 months under the Hearing Services Program. The cost may vary if you have a top-up hearing aid.

For more information, go to www.health.gov.au/hear or phone the Office of Hearing Services on 1800 500 726, or phone Better Hearing Australia on either (07) 3844 5065 (Brisbane office) or 1300 242 842 (main office in Victoria).

Hearing Aid Tips

- Ask your hearing services provider about having a trial period of 30 days or 60 days.
- If you have hearing loss in both ears, it is usually recommended that you obtain two aids.
- Think about Behind the Ear (BTE) aids as opposed to In the Ear or In the Canal aids. BTE aids apparently have fewer problems with wax and water and thus generally last rather longer, they can be more powerful, 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, background noise program, Telecoil (also known as a T switch, useful in some theatres, churches, etc).
- Start by wearing the hearing aid/s at home to get used to amplified sounds.
- Regular cleaning is necessary to stop wax build-up, but this soon becomes 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.
- **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.**
- If you are not eligible for free aids, you might find the following information useful.

Hearing Aids for non-Pensioners on Low Incomes

If you aren't eligible for free hearing aids through the Office of Hearing Services, you may be able to have one re-conditioned hearing aid fitted at a reduced cost through a hearing aid bank. Eligibility in Queensland is for people who have a Health Care Card or who can show they cannot afford an aid. You will need a referral from a Qld Health or Northern NSW Hospital.

Queensland's hearing aid bank is at Princess Alexandra Hospital at Woolloongabba. Phone 07 3240 2314 for more information.

Buying a Hearing Aid Privately: A Senior's Experience

When you are not eligible for free hearing aids, the buying process can be expensive, confusing and time-consuming process. If you have private health insurance, you may be able to get the cost partly covered.

As I was not eligible for free aids, my first step was to obtaining a hearing test. This in itself 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 cost \$100 or more. Audiologists don't seem to want to accept other companies' tests, so I ended up having three tests, one free but 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 of aids that I was considering buying. Some hearing companies deal with several different brands, some only deal with one brand.

Some important things I learnt were:

- Shop around – aids can cost between perhaps \$1000 and \$10 000 each. I found one audiologist selling a particular aid for \$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 after the trial period, you can try a different aid or get your money back (but do see an audiologist/audiometrist during the trial period for adjustments).

Using the hearing aid

Following are my experiences after buying my hearing aids and using them for some months:

I ended up buying aids that were relatively cheap (an introductory price on a new model, and including seniors' discount); they are Behind the Ear aids which have enough of the features I wanted. [I have since discovered that with advances in hearing aids, the free government aids are now better than my aids, though these have been most satisfactory].

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: first, 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, toilet flushing, 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. At one point 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 issues – 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 quite comfortable, so that I rarely 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. (Later addition: I now tend to turn one of the hearing aids off if I am in a particularly noisy situation e.g. some restaurants.)

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

Further Information

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

- Check the Frequently Asked Questions at the Office of Hearing Services' website, www.health.gov.au/hear or phone 1800 500 726.
- Phone Better Hearing Australia at (07) 3844 5065 (Brisbane office) or 1300 242 842 (main office in Victoria).
- Look at information sheets from SHHH (Self Help for Hard of Hearing People) at www.shhhaust.org/information-sheets or phone (02) 9144 7586.
- Check article titled 'Saving on hearing aids' in Choice Magazine, Feb 2013, either online at www.choice.com.au (type 'hearing aids' in the search box) or check if your local library has a copy of the magazine. Choice also has an older article which you might find useful, from July 2006.
- 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 your audiologist for further clarification.