

What are the costs associated with fitting hearing aids?

The costs associated with a hearing aid fitting include not only the device but also the professional skills and knowledge of your audiologist. The value of an audiologist's intervention lies in the education and training as a professional with a unique skill set to ensure that your device is fit and adjusted to your specific needs through verification and follow-up.

Audiologists are educated to make specific recommendations regarding hearing aid style and technology based on diagnostic test results and an understanding of your lifestyle and listening needs through a comprehensive discussion with you. A hearing aid solution that works for one person may not work for another. Your audiologist will also consider physical and anatomic factors that can help determine the best hearing aids for you. These factors include dexterity, ear size and shape, wax production, skin conditions and aesthetics.

Your audiologist has considerable clinical training. Audiologists are educated in normal and abnormal auditory anatomy and physiology, and can identify conditions that may require medical treatment. Audiologists are also trained to understand electronics, speech acoustics and how the ear and brain process speech. This background allows your audiologist to select features and programming that will maximize your ability to hear speech and other important sounds in a variety of situations.

To practice audiology in the United States, a license as well as a doctoral degree or master's degree in audiology is required. Graduate program areas of study include diagnosis and treatment of hearing loss and balance disorders, anatomy and physiology, normal and abnormal communication development, genetics, ethics, physics, pharmacology and more. The audiologist considers all of these in addition to your individual listening needs when assisting you with amplification (hearing aid) selection and fitting.

Using this extensive background of knowledge, an audiologist will verify your hearing aid settings at the fitting appointment. Verification refers to measures made to determine that the hearing aids meet a set of standards which includes volume, output, cosmetic appeal, and physical comfort. Using evidence-based practices, real-ear measurements will be obtained using a small microphone placed in the ear with the hearing aid to ensure that appropriate volume is provided for different signals (such as speech). If earmolds or custom hearing aids are ordered, it is necessary to ensure that their characteristics (type of tubing, venting, style and material) are appropriate for the degree of hearing loss and physical characteristics of the ear.

The cost of a hearing aid also includes the professional time for follow-up visits in addition to the initial fitting and orientation appointment. Adapting to amplification will take time, and follow-up appointments to make adjustments to the device may be necessary as your brain becomes accustomed to hearing new

sounds. Everyone has unique tolerances to sound and your audiologist may need to tailor the response of your device based on your comments over an extended period of time as sounds are reintroduced to your ear.

Amplification costs also include the hearing aid technology and the research and development which helped to design the devices. The technology in modern digital hearing aids is sophisticated and consists of microphones, amplifiers, miniature CPU (computer) systems and is designed to enhance the sounds from the environment. All sounds (including speech) are filtered through a series of processors to provide the best signal possible. Additionally, hearing aids can be used effectively with telephones to improve the user's ability to hear on the phone and the aids can also connect you wirelessly to cell phones and other Bluetooth devices.

In addition to providing customized amplification based on the user's hearing loss, the device is constantly analyzing the environment and making adjustments based on the type and amount of background noise present in a listener's environment. Additionally, many of the hearing aids available today have the ability to 'communicate' with each other (when worn in pairs) and this can be a great advantage in many listening situations.

In addition to having the capability to make automatic and customized adjustments, the hearing aid must be resilient for daily use. Hearing aids are designed to withstand daily exposure to skin oils, hair spray and other hair products, moisture from the air and, of course, ear wax.

Hearing aid technology is constantly improving in order to maximize enhancement of signals and sounds that reach the ear and keep you connected to your 'auditory world.' Audiology researchers and engineers are working to continually improve hearing aid technology.

Finally, it should be recognized that despite wonderful advancements in technology, hearing aids do not restore hearing to normal that is why a comprehensive communications strategy is an essential part of learning to maximize the amplified sound when one has hearing loss.

Obtaining comprehensive hearing care from an audiologist is an investment in your auditory health and results in improved communication, improved speech understanding, and improved quality of life.

