

Hearing aid guide

This guide is an overview of the various types of hearing aids available. Your audiologist can provide you with more specific information on a particular hearing aid brand. Some features may not be appropriate for certain types hearing loss.

Where do I start?

Most visits to HealthPartners Audiology Clinic begin with a visit to your primary care doctor. Your doctor may want to check for ear wax and other medical issues before getting your hearing tested. Also federal regulation requires the consent of a medical doctor before buying a hearing aid (a patient over 18 may waive this right). Members may self-refer, and your audiologist will consult with your primary care doctor to obtain appropriate consent.

What if I have a hearing loss?

After a complete evaluation, your audiologist can help answer this question. Most hearing loss in adults is permanent (not correctable by medication or surgery), but in many cases a hearing aid will help. How much a hearing aid helps will vary by the individual, the degree of hearing loss and the listening environment. In some cases, testing may indicate referral to an otolaryngologist (ear, nose and throat specialist) for possible medical or surgical correction for the hearing loss.

Do hearing aids work when there is background noise?

Everyone experiences increased difficulty hearing in the presence of noise, and this is usually worse for someone with hearing loss. However, properly fit hearing aids can provide significant benefit in this situation.

State-of-the-art directional microphone hearing aids can noticeably improve your ability to hear sounds in front of you compared with those behind you (improved signal-to-noise ratio). This can be helpful in a busy restaurant, for example, where the voices behind you are louder than those across the table from you.

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Digital hearing aids also offer help for noisy situations. They can “self adjust” in certain situations to help filter out some of the noise. No hearing aid can eliminate background noise, but the digital products can reduce some of the effects of background noise. Your expectations need to be realistic. There may be situations where the noise simply overwhelms what you want to hear. (This is also true for individuals with normal hearing.) For severe speech-in-noise problems, remote microphone FM systems are available.

Which hearing aid style should I consider?

Hearing aids are available in several styles outlined below. The best type for you depends on your hearing loss, ear anatomy, life style and demands on your hearing. After your hearing evaluation, your audiologist can help you make this choice. Below are the four major styles of hearing aids:



Photo courtesy of Widex Hearing Aid Company

Behind-the-ear (BTE). This type of hearing aid fits over the top and back of your ear. It is held in place by an ear mold that fits into your ear canal directing sound from the hearing aid toward your ear drum. It is easy to manipulate, and all the advanced circuit types can fit in this model. The battery life averages 14 days. Prices start at \$800. Digital models range from \$1,200 to \$3,000. FM technologies for maximum noise reduction are compatible with this style.



Photo courtesy of Phonak Hearing Aid Company

In-the-ear (ITE). This style fills the bowl and canal of your ear, however, there is no external piece sitting on top of your ear. Like the BTE, it is easy to operate and most advanced circuit types fit in this model. The battery life is about 14 days. Prices start at \$750. Digital models range from \$1,200 to \$2,500.



Photo courtesy of Widex Hearing Aid Company

In-the-canal (ITC). This style fits mainly in your ear canal and is noticeably less visible than the BTE or ITE. Because it is smaller, it may be more difficult to manipulate, and not all circuit types will fit into this model. The battery life is less as the battery is smaller (10 to 12 days). Prices for this style start at \$800, with digital models ranging from \$1,300 to \$2,600.



Photo courtesy of Widex Hearing Aid Company

Completely-in-the-canal (CIC). This type of hearing aid fits deeply into your ear canal and is virtually invisible. Because it is so small, not all circuit types can be accommodated, nor is it a good choice for severe and profound hearing losses. The battery life is about five days. Analog aids in this style are \$1,300, and digital range from \$1,600 to \$2,900.

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Digital or analog technology

Analog: You now have a choice between analog or digital circuits for your hearing aid. Up until the mid 1990s, analog was the only type of hearing aid circuit available. This circuit uses a variety of electronic components assembled together to arrive at the appropriate “prescription” for an individual’s hearing loss. Analog circuits are “hard wired” and may require rebuilding or replacement to make major changes in their “prescription.” Most have a user volume control and a few controls that allow for limited adjustment or fine tuning by your audiologist. For people in a limited and controlled listening situation, analog circuits may provide a satisfactory solution to their hearing loss. Individuals used to using analog hearing aids may have a preference for analog sound (as the quality of analog sound and digital sound are different). Prices for analog hearing aids range from \$750 and up depending on the style.

Digital have been widely available since 1997. They are microprocessor based devices that convert an analog signal into a digital signal, with the processor making the necessary adjustments to arrive at the appropriate “prescription” for an individuals’ hearing loss. By working with a digital signal, a particular sound can be manipulated and enhanced along a number of dimensions in a fraction of a second. With more advanced digital circuits other sounds may be reduced (such as background noise). Most hearing aids sold today are digital. Some of the advantages of digital hearing aids are as follows:

- They are more flexible, allowing more adjustments for a more precise fit of a particular hearing loss.
- Digital hearing respond to changes in sound loudness in a fraction of a second, allowing in some cases for the hearing aid to control volume automatically
- Digital hearing aids can allow more features to be made available in a smaller case size, due to the miniaturization of microprocessors.

Digital hearing aids can be divided into three levels of technology: entry level, mid level, and advanced. Below is a description of each:

Entry-level digital hearing aids cost between \$1200 and \$1700 for each ear fitted. They are very flexible compared to analog technology, offer a range of adjustments and can be fit to a wide range of losses. Most have a volume control; however some can be set to provide basic “automatic” volume control.

Mid-level digital hearing aids cost between \$1500 and \$2000 for each ear fitted. They offer more flexibility than entry level, sound can be adjusted in a greater number of channels. They are available with multiple programs, where more than one prescription can be programmed into the hearing aid, allowing the wearer to switch to a different listening prescription when their environment changes. Most are available with a directional microphone, which allows for better hearing of sounds in front of the listener compared to the back. Some have a basic automatic feedback control, and most offer some basic noise reduction methods (where background noise may be controlled but not eliminated).

Advanced digital hearing aids cost between \$2000 and \$3000 for each ear fitted. These offer a greater number of channels than the mid-level hearing aids with more advanced adaptive directional microphones (microphones that adjust themselves to prioritize speech even if it is not directly in front of you). Automatic feedback control is more advanced on this type of instrument. Like mid level digital hearing aids, these offer multiple programs, however with advanced hearing aids the switching between these programs occurs automatically (or manually if you choose).

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Advanced circuits can be programmed to offer the widest range of automatic volume control (enhancement of the soft sounds as well as the greatest control over unwanted louder sounds). For individuals with the greatest listening demands, advanced digital hearing aids may offer the best solution. Also because advanced circuits offer the most automatic control they are also a good choice for someone who does not want to make manual adjustments to their hearing aid.

Should I get a hearing aid for each ear?

If a hearing loss is present in both of your ears, using two hearing aids is best. Wearing two hearing aids adds “depth perception” to your hearing and helps you sort out speech in a background of noise. It also helps you localize or tell where sounds are coming from. Two hearing aids are most beneficial in noisy situations.

What type of sales policy should I expect?

By state law, all hearing aid sales come with a 30-day return privilege. This means that, for any reason, you may return your purchase and receive most of your money back (a return fee of up to 10% of the full purchase price may be charged). The typical return fee at HealthPartners is \$75.00, and the standard 30-day trial is extended to 45 days.

What type of warranty should I expect?

The warranties on hearing aids sold at HealthPartners range from one to three years (assistive listening devices and starter hearing aids may be less). A written copy of the warranty should accompany your hearing aid. Once the aid is out of warranty, if a major repair is required, a fee of \$100 to \$250 can be expected. Repairs that need to go back to the manufacturer take an average of 10 business days to complete.

Where do I buy my hearing aid?

If your audiologist has recommended that you be fitted with a hearing aid, you can purchase one at the Audiology Clinic or at a hearing aid vendor of your choice. HealthPartners Audiology Clinic offers competitive pricing and service. **If you have coverage for a hearing aid it will not apply outside of the HealthPartners network.** To determine if you have coverage for a hearing aid, please call member services at 952-883-5000.

Do I look for a particular brand of hearing aid?

There are many brands and manufacturers of hearing aids. Most names are not familiar to consumers. Those that are familiar are often considerably more expensive due to their marketing costs. It is therefore important to have an audiologist whom you trust make recommendations about which brand and circuit may be best for you. The audiologist’s experience with multiple brands can help provide you with the best quality and performance at a reasonable price.

What’s my next step?

If you have further questions, call the Audiology Clinic at 651-999-4639, or email: audiology@healthpartners.com. To schedule an audiogram or hearing aid evaluation, call 952-967-7977. Please note an audiogram must be done at the HealthPartners Audiology Clinic prior to the hearing aid evaluation visit. While the initial audiogram is usually covered, the fee charged for the hearing aid evaluation may not be covered by your insurance. HealthPartners Audiology Services are offered at Como Clinic, West Clinic (St. Louis Park) and Regions Hospital.