

Senior Digest

H E A L T H

Hearing Health: Common Questions With Uncommon Answers

by Dr. Ross Cushing

The topic of hearing health and hearing aids is usually one people try to avoid. Why? Perhaps it is because there are so many questions, and no obviously easy way to find out answers. To assist you with such research, this article will address some typical concerns about hearing health and hearing aids.

Common Question 1: Are hearing aids overpriced? I've heard they are "expensive."

Uncommon Answer: This is a touchy subject among hearing aid dispensers (although there's no reason it should be). The truth of the matter is that hearing aids are usually not overpriced, although how they are priced and what you are actually paying for can vary widely.

Like most products, there are economy models on one end of the spectrum and top-of-the-line models on the other. It is, therefore, very difficult for consumers to know what hearing aid is actually a good hearing aid. As a consumer, your job is to find a trustworthy health care professional, a doctor of audiology, to help you make this decision.

A doctor of audiology is not a hearing aid salesperson, but a trained professional who is able to provide diagnostic testing and then discuss with you hearing health information and options specific to your hearing and your lifestyle needs.

Briefly, the two main reasons hearing aids cost as much as they do are first: there is a tremendous amount of research and development in the cost that the manufacturers must cover, especially as they work to continue improving the ways hearing aids enhance hearing in noisy environments. (There has been major improvement with this issue, just in the past couple years.) High-end hearing aids can cost more than basic hearing aids because they are essentially top-of-the-line computers for your ears.

The difference between high-end computers and hearing instruments, however, is that hearing aids are not mass produced. This means the manufacturers can never experience the per-unit cost savings of mass production. They are hand-made and custom-fit for each individual ear, based on the diagnosis and recommendations of the audiologist.

Remember, too, that the price of hearing instruments usually includes time for the audiologist's services. This is why it is so important to pick the right provider. With the right provider you are much more likely to have success with hearing aids. An audiologist will program the hearing aids, counsel you on how to use the device, and teach you about communication strategies.

When you think of the value of such customized technol-

ogy, this is an investment that impacts your mental, emotional, and even physical health and safety. For example, just one mis-heard question or instruction from a physician could mean life or death. Get your instrument from a doctor of audiology who has 8 years of college training to help you make the right decision.

Common Question 2: If I find the best hearing aid for the least amount of money I'll have the best deal, right?

Uncommon Answer: Unfortunately, hearing aid shopping is NOT like shopping around for a new pair of shoes. It may be cheap in the very short term to buy hearing aids on the Internet, for example, but look at the risk you are taking. Without the help of a professional, it is hard to evaluate the different models to ensure what you buy is just what you need—nothing more, nothing less. Shopping price alone for something that should be customized for your particular hearing loss will, in the long-run, result in dissatisfaction and frustration.

The most important thing you, as a consumer, can do is to find a reputable professional who will recommend the best and most appropriate hearing aid(s) for you. Doctors of audiology (they have the initials "Au.D." after their names) have been educated for years — focusing just on hearing health. They will not only provide

a thorough evaluation of your hearing, but will be most familiar with all types of technology that can assist you in the decision-making process, no matter what your budget is.

Common Question 3: Is there any way to identify a good provider of audiology services and hearing aids?

Uncommon Answer: You can ask your primary care doctor, your friends with hearing aids, or call the Maryland Board of Examiners at 1-877-463-3464. They might have some suggestions to start your list. Once you have a few recommendations, actually pick up the phone and call around to speak with doctors of audiology in your area. When you talk to the audiologist, tell him or her that you are looking for someone to help you with your hearing health, and ask them if they wouldn't mind telling you a little bit about their education, background and interests. It's okay to interview your providers; in fact, it really is the best way to make a decision about your health care, no matter what field of health care.



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