

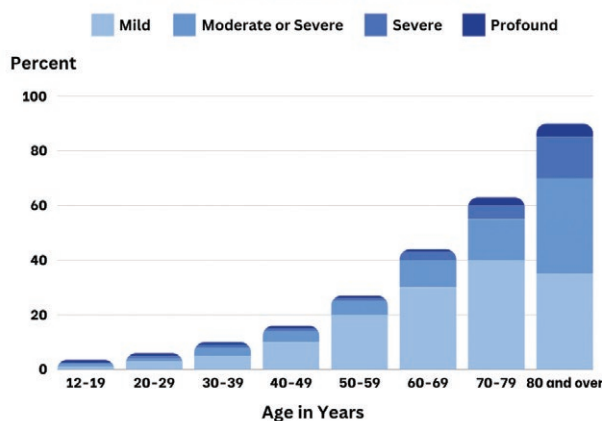
# How To Choose A Hearing Healthcare Provider

by Laurie Orlov

**Over-The-Counter hearing aids are a useful addition to the marketplace, but there's no substitute for the care of a credentialed, experienced professional.**

Today, approximately 15.5% of Americans over the age of 20 experience some form of hearing loss – more than 44 million people.<sup>1</sup> There are various causes for hearing loss, but age is one of the strongest predictors – nearly 80% of people aged 70 and older report hearing loss in at least one ear.<sup>2</sup>

HEARING LOSS SEVERITY BY AGE



National Council on Aging<sup>3</sup>

Despite the prevalence of hearing loss, people still wait an average of as much as seven years from the time they start having hearing issues until they seek help for it.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this can exacerbate other health issues – called comorbidities – which are linked to untreated hearing loss, such as increased fall risk, cognitive decline and depression.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, it's possible to mitigate these effects by addressing hearing loss as soon as it's recognized as a problem. And the key to that starts with finding the right hearing healthcare professional to guide you in your journey. It's hard to gauge the level of hearing loss you may be experiencing on your own – and nearly impossible to identify actual causes – without the guidance and tools provided by a hearing healthcare professional. Online self-testing tools aren't much more than simple hearing acuity tests. They don't offer a physical examination of your inner ear and aren't going to provide insight as to potential causes. Correctly diagnosing hearing issues and deciding on the best course of treatment are critical elements in hearing healthcare and can only be provided by a qualified professional.

Choosing the right hearing healthcare professional can seem like a daunting task. There's much to be considered, and if it isn't something you've done before, even knowing where to start might be a challenge. This guide aims to empower you with the information you need to make the best possible decisions to manage your hearing health journey.



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## OTC Hearing Aids

As of Oct. 17, 2022, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration established a new category of hearing aids in an effort to increase access for people with mild to moderate hearing loss. This new Over-The-Counter (OTC) market comes with pros and cons. There are many options available, and people who are interested in a potential device should definitely research the options.

## Benefits Of Choosing A Hearing Healthcare Professional Over The OTC Market

OTC hearing devices may seem convenient since they can be purchased without personalized care and expertise provided by a licensed hearing healthcare professional. However, here are some key benefits of choosing a hearing healthcare professional:

- **Personalized Assessment and Treatment Plans:** Hearing healthcare professionals conduct thorough assessments to understand your unique hearing needs and develop personalized treatment plans tailored to your lifestyle and preferences.
- **Ongoing Support and Follow-up Care:** Unlike OTC devices, which may offer limited or no post-purchase support, hearing healthcare professionals provide ongoing support and follow-up care, ensuring the optimal performance of your hearing aids and addressing any concerns or needed adjustments.
- **Access to Advanced Technology and Specialized Services:** Hearing healthcare professionals have access to advanced hearing aid technology and offer specialized services, such as tinnitus management and auditory rehabilitation programs, that may not be available with OTC devices.

## Range of Hearing Services Offered

Hearing healthcare professionals offer a wide range of services to address various aspects of hearing loss and auditory health, some of which include:

- **Hearing Evaluations and Diagnostic Tests:** Comprehensive hearing evaluations, including pure-tone audiometry and speech audiometry, are conducted to assess your hearing abilities and determine the type and severity of hearing loss.
- **Hearing Aid Fittings and Adjustments:** Hearing aid fittings involve selecting the most appropriate hearing aid and programming it to meet your specific hearing needs. Ongoing adjustments and fine-tuning ensure optimal hearing aid performance.
- **Tinnitus Management and Counseling:** Tinnitus, or ringing in the ears, can significantly impact quality of life. Hearing healthcare professionals offer counseling and management strategies to help alleviate tinnitus symptoms which can improve quality of life.
- **Assistive Listening Devices and Accessories:** In addition to hearing aids, a hearing healthcare professional can recommend assistive listening devices and accessories, such as captioned telephones and FM systems, which can enhance communication in various listening environments.



## Understanding Your Needs

Hearing loss can be a progressive condition, worsening over time.<sup>6</sup> When it comes to mitigating the effects of hearing loss progression, the earlier you address it, the better. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) says it's time to see a hearing healthcare professional if you answer "yes" to two or more of the following questions<sup>7</sup>:

- Do you have a problem hearing over the telephone?
- Do you hear better in one ear than the other when you are on the phone?
- Do you have trouble understanding when two or more people talk at the same time?
- Do people complain that you turn the TV volume up too high?
- Do you have to strain to understand what people say?
- Do you have trouble hearing in a noisy place?
- Do you have trouble hearing in restaurants?
- Do you have dizziness, pain, or ringing in your ears?
- Do you ask people to repeat what they said?
- Do family members or coworkers tell you that you are not hearing what they say?
- Do many people you talk to seem to mumble or not speak clearly?
- Do you have trouble understanding the voices of women and children?
- Do people get annoyed because you don't understand what they say?

If you answered yes to two or more of these, it's time to visit a professional.



## Factors to Consider When Choosing a Hearing Healthcare Professional

Professional qualifications and credentials play a crucial role in ensuring you receive quality care. Look for providers who are licensed and certified by reputable organizations such as:

- **American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)** – Use their ASHA ProFind tool at [Asha.org/profind](https://asha.org/profind)
- **American Board of Audiology (ABA)** – Search their full directory of credentialed professionals at [audiology.org/American-Board-of-Audiology/About-the-ABA/aba-Directories/](https://audiology.org/American-Board-of-Audiology/About-the-ABA/aba-Directories/)
- **American Academy of Audiology (AAA)** – Search their easy-to-use directory by location or specialty at [members.audiology.org/cvweb/cgi-bin/memberdll.dll/info?wrp=find-an-audiologist.htm](https://members.audiology.org/cvweb/cgi-bin/memberdll.dll/info?wrp=find-an-audiologist.htm)

Make sure to consider the experience and expertise of the providers as you evaluate them. Patient reviews and testimonials can provide valuable insights into the quality of care provided by hearing healthcare professionals and the support staff in their offices. Accessibility and convenience are also essential factors to consider, especially if you have mobility issues or transportation limitations. Convenient location and flexible appointment scheduling options are other factors to consider as you weigh your options.

## Questions to Ask During the Initial Consultation

During an initial consultation with a hearing healthcare professional, consider asking the following questions:

- **Clarifying the Treatment Approach and Options:**  
What treatment options are available for my specific type of hearing loss? Can you explain the pros and cons of each option?
- **Understanding the Costs Involved and Insurance Coverage:**  
What are the costs associated with hearing evaluations, hearing aids and other services? Does my insurance cover any of these expenses?
- **Inquiring About Follow-Up Care and Maintenance:**  
What type of follow-up care and maintenance do you provide for hearing aids? How often will I need to come in for adjustments or check-ups?

Choosing the right hearing healthcare provider is a critical decision that can significantly impact your quality of life. By considering factors such as professional qualifications, experience, and the range of services offered, you can make an informed choice that meets your individual needs and preferences. Remember to advocate for your hearing health and seek out the support and expertise of a licensed hearing healthcare professional.

For further information and support, visit reputable resources such as the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) at [Asha.org](https://asha.org), the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) at [HearingLoss.org](https://hearingloss.org) or the American Academy of Audiology at [audiology.org](https://audiology.org). Don't hesitate to proactively reach out to a hearing healthcare professional for assistance, and take the next step in your hearing health journey.

## References

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