

Audiologists: Checking Up on Your Hearing

When is the last time you thought about your hearing? If you're 55 or older, or find yourself saying "What?" a lot, it's time. Time for a baseline hearing check, a 30- to 60-minute evaluation that not only assesses overall hearing loss but the type of loss (low tones, high tones?) as well. The best person to conduct that test? An audiologist.

Audiologists are to hearing what optometrists are to vision: licensed professionals with the advanced training needed to evaluate a sensory organ and diagnose problems. Unlike otolaryngologists (ear, nose and throat doctors) or ophthalmologists, however, they cannot prescribe medication, perform surgery, or engage in other medically related activities. In other words, they are not medical doctors.

However, like an optometrist who can "treat" your failing vision with glasses or contact lenses, audiologists can "treat" your hearing loss with hearing aids, said Kathy Landau Goodman, Au.D., president of Main Line Audiology in the Philadelphia area. Goodman also chairs the Audiology Awareness Campaign, a nonprofit organization founded to increase awareness of hearing loss and audiology.

Forget everything you ever thought you knew about hearing aids, however. Today's hearing aids are most definitely not your father's. "There have been tremendous advances in the technology and the sound quality is far superior, pretty incredible actually, than they were years

ago," said Goodman.

Rather than amplifying all sounds equally, today's hearing aids can be programmed to let soft sounds come through stronger than loud sounds, eliminating the frustration wearers used to experience in noisy environments. There are even Bluetooth-compatible hearing aids that can sync with your phone or television, allowing sound to come directly into your ear.

"But hearing aids only work as well as the audiologist doing the fitting and programming," said Goodman. Even the same brand of hearing aid may work differently depending on how it's programmed. While it is possible to simply order a hearing aid from a distributor it will never provide the kind of sound quality and clarity that comes from a properly fitted and programmed aid. To get that, Goodman recommends visiting a licensed audiologist who carries several brands of hearing aids. "There is not one manufacturer that has the best technology to meet every person's needs," she says.

The amazing thing to her, even after 25 years in practice, is the difference hearing

aids can make in someone's life. "I see it in someone's face when they first come in," she said. "They're irritable and short-tempered because hearing problems affect their whole life." After they get used to the hearing aids, she said, "They're smiling and more relaxed." One patient told her his long-standing depression improved along with his hearing.

That doesn't surprise Goodman. People with significant hearing loss gradually limit their social life, cutting out movies and visits with friends because communication is so difficult. Many aren't even aware that their hearing has faded. Often, it's the people around them who notice first.

Unfortunately, too many people have misconceptions about hearing aids, said Goodman. "They think their hearing isn't bad enough to need hearing aids," she said, "when in fact the people who can be helped most are those with mild or moderate hearing loss." They may also think they have to be "old" to need a hearing aid, when, in fact, most people today with hearing loss are under 65. Goodman said, this is the result of the noisier environment in which we live. By the time many people get hearing aids, she said, "they say they wish they'd done it years before."

"If you want to see clearly, you get contact lenses or eyeglasses," she said. "If you want to hear clearly, you wear hearing aids."

News In Brief

THE AUDIOLOGY AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

Hearing loss is the third most chronic health problem in America. Untreated hearing loss negatively impacts income on-average up to \$12,000. The Audiology Awareness Campaign is a not-for-profit foundation whose mission is to educate the public about the value of hearing healthcare. The foundation represents audiologists nationally to increase public awareness of hearing healthcare. To learn more about protecting your hearing and hearing loss, request a free consumer educational booklet entitled "Listen-UP America; We Hear You". For a free set of earplugs call 888-833-EARS(3277) or visit our website www.audiologyawareness.com. Not sure about your hearing? Take a free Online Hearing test, read consumer-friendly brochures about hearing loss and hearing aids, discover more about audiology services, post a question about hearing on "Ask an Audiologist," or "Find an Audiologist" in your area who offers professional services. For further information about the foundation contact Dr. Landau Goodman at kgoodman@audiologyawareness.com.

Hearing Aids: The Future Is Now

Super Bowl winner and New York Giants defensive line coach Mike Waufle knows a lot about loud noise. The 54-year old is surrounded by roaring crowds every Sunday during football season. At practice he hears the crack of helmets and sharp clanking of weights. In the early 1970s as a U.S. Marine, his ears were assaulted by rifle shots and booming artillery that severely damaged his hearing.

"As a coach, I'm a teacher, so clear communication is really important. I was missing a lot of conversations and couldn't always hear what my players or colleagues said. Hearing loss was also affecting my speech patterns. I tried all kinds of hearing aids but most ended up in a drawer," said Coach Waufle, who is one of the 35 million Americans with severe hearing loss.

The solution to his problem was provided by the team's ear, nose and throat consultant, Michael Scherl, M.D., with his audiology colleagues. Little more than two years ago, Dr. Scherl was involved in early trial work on a unique new hearing aid called Lyric. It was conceived in Silicon Valley to provide users benefits similar to extended wear contact lenses.

Unlike conventional hearing aids that have external microphones and require weekly battery changes, Lyric rests deep in the ear canal. It is invisible, completely self-contained and approximately one-half inch long. The flexible, foam-covered device rests a fraction of an inch from the eardrum to provide exemplary sound quality while making use of the ear's natural anatomy to funnel sound. It can operate 24/7 for up to four months before having to be replaced by an audiologist.

"Since getting Lyric, my quality of life

has been so much better," said Coach Waufle. "For instance, the Giants have a large field house with horrible acoustics. Our head coach recently walked up behind me and I could hear every word he was saying. Before Lyric, that would not have been possible. No matter who you are or what you do, it's really important to know what your boss—or spouse—is sharing with you.

"Beyond that, the biggest change is I can now hear little things like a pencil on the paper when I'm writing, or a turn signal in my car. My daughter says it's fun watching TV together because the sound isn't blaring any more. There are so many things to appreciate that could have easily slipped away."

Although Lyric represents a unique advance in hearing aid design, technology is advancing elsewhere, too.

"Bluetooth capabilities are being added to a host of new hearing aids," said veteran audiologist Richard Kaner of Brooklyn Audiology Associates. "For instance, Oticon has a device called the Streamer™ that users wear around the neck. It's an interface between hearing aids and cell phones, land lines, television sets, MP3 players and computers."

Other leading manufacturers such as Phonak, Siemens and Bernafon also offer

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expanded connectivity options.

Starkey has been a leader in volume adjustment. Users can touch the back of certain hearing aids to adjust volume, or use the touch pad of their cell phone or land line. Additionally, a number of manufacturers are improving speech understanding by transposing high frequencies to lower frequencies.

Philadelphia audiologist Dr. Kathy Landau Goodman, Au.D., of Main Line Audiology agrees the future of hearing aids is extended wear devices like Lyric, and devices that can interface with other technologies such as cell phones.

"The most striking thing for me these past 25 years has been the improvement in sound quality," said Dr. Goodman. "Years ago, we didn't have great technology. Now we do. One client recently said he feels like he's gone from a horse and buggy to a luxury car."

If you or someone you know has difficulty hearing, contact a local audiologist who will partner with you to select an appropriate hearing technology.

As Helen Keller wrote, "Blindness separates us from things but deafness separates us from people."

Author Dr. Paul Pessis, Au.D., is owner and director of North Shore Audio-Vestibular Lab in Chicago, and past president of the American Academy of Audiology.