



HEALTH / FINANCES / CONNECTING / GIVING / ENJOYING

**1. Don't go it alone.** Bring along a friend or relative. "One of the most important steps you can take is to bring a spouse, family member or friend to the examination," says Juliette Sterkens, an audiologist in Oshkosh, Wis. "Two people hear and remember more."

**2. Interview a provider.** "The number one thing to remember is that the value you get out of your hearing aid is based on the skills and abilities of the hearing health professional," says Sergei Kochkin of the Better Hearing Institute. Audiologists and hearing instrument specialists are both licensed to sell hearing aids, but audiologists hold a master's or doctoral degree in audiology. Get referrals from health care professionals. The [American Speech-Language-Hearing Association](#) and the [American Academy of Audiology](#) offer information on how to find a hearing professional.

**3. Know before you go.** "Most people have had trouble with their hearing for years," says Barry Freeman, an audiologist and chairman of the board of the National Council for Better Hearing. Yet they wait an average of five to seven years before buying a hearing aid. The worse the hearing loss, the harder it is for your brain to adjust, so it's important to act as soon as you think you may have hearing loss. When new patients come to him, Freeman quizzes them: "What do you want the hearing aid to do for you? Do you just want to be able to hear the television? Or do you hope to hear the sermon in church?" Knowing your priorities will help the professional determine what style and technology are best for you.

**4. Have your hearing tested.** During your visit, you should be given a hearing test in a soundproof booth. It will tell the audiologist or hearing specialist what type of hearing loss you have so a hearing aid can be programmed specifically for you. Not all devices will fit every person or every degree of hearing loss. And "these are custom-made devices," says Linda Remensnyder, an audiologist near Chicago. "It's not prudent to buy online or from a big-box retail store."

**5. Try before you buy.** Ask for a demonstration of the hearing aids recommended for you. An audiologist may be able to put a disposable plug on the tip of a behind-the-ear hearing aid and program the device to your hearing loss so you can experience how it works. A simulated sound field also can show how a hearing aid works in particular situations, so check the hearing aid in noisy settings. And take your time. "This is way too important and costly a decision to make in a hurry," says Sterkens.

**6. Ask about add-ons.** Don't be pressured into buying extras you don't need — all technology comes at a price. However, directional microphones that help you hear in noisy places, tele-coils that help with phone conversations, and feedback cancellation that prevents the aid from squealing all received high marks from [Consumer Reports](#). Wireless technology makes it easier to use cellphones and televisions, and ear wax protection can prevent malfunctions. But consider what you really need. "If you generally don't go out a lot or you entertain at home, you may not need as many advanced features, which can [save you money](#)," says Tobie Sanger, *Consumer Reports* senior editor.

A hearing test will help determine the best hearing aid for your needs. — Peter Hebeisen/Gallery Stock

**7. Can you hear me now?** After you buy your hearing aid, don't leave the office without checking whether it fits. And not just physically; does it do what you want it to do? Ask to have an automated "real ear" test to see how it works in your ear.

**8. Get it in writing.** Get a signed copy of a contract that outlines what you're buying — the model and make of hearing aid — and the price, trial period, any nonrefundable fees as well as the warranty, says Lise Hamlin, director of public policy for the [Hearing Loss Association of America](#). Most manufacturers allow a 30- to 60-day trial period, and follow-up visits are a must. "Expect at least three or four in the first two months," says Sterkens.

**9. Ask about training.** There is more to buying a hearing aid than just fitting it to your ear. "You don't hear with your ear, you hear with your brain, and your brain doesn't know what to do with the sound after you get your hearing aids," says Freeman. Ask your audiologist about aural education and rehabilitation. Some auditory training can be done at home with a personal computer or through group sessions.

**10. Pay the piper.** These small technological marvels can cost between \$1,200 and \$3,700, an outlay not covered by [Medicare](#) or most private insurance companies. A 2009 *Consumer Reports* survey noted that there is an average retail markup of 117 percent, which leaves room to bargain.

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