



**HEARING MATTERS
AUSTRALIA**

Support from real life experience

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GETTING THE BEST FROM YOUR HEARING AID MANAGING HEARING LOSS

When those who have impaired hearing have acknowledged their hearing loss, had an assessment by professionally qualified people, and been fitted with correctly prescribed hearing aids, they can expect to function normally in most family and social situations.

We can be confident of success if we:

- Learn to manage hearing aids effectively
- Supplement our aids with appropriate assistive devices if necessary
- Adopt good listening tactics
- Have patience, perseverance and practise!

UNDERSTANDING HEARING LOSS

One of the major causes of hearing loss in older people is presbycusis – when the ageing process causes a progressive fall in the sensitivity of the ear to high frequency, or high pitched sounds. Another common cause is exposure to loud and/or prolonged noise – known as ‘noise induced hearing loss’ or ‘industrial deafness’. This usually causes severe impairment in the higher frequencies, and lower frequencies can also be affected. Other causes may be related to illness, injury, or genetic factors, and the pattern of loss may be varied.

While we are all aware of the importance of the volume of sound in our ability to hear, we are perhaps not so familiar with the effects of the frequency, or pitch, of sound. Almost all the sounds we hear have components of different sound frequencies. If our ability to hear some of those frequencies is diminished, we may still hear the sound but it will seem to us to be muffled or distorted.

This applies particularly to the sounds of speech, where the vowels are low frequency sounds, while the consonants fall into the higher frequency range. Highest of all are the unvoiced sounds, such as ‘s’ ‘sh’ and ‘th’. If we have a high frequency hearing loss, we will not find it easy, for instance, to hear the difference between the words ‘three’ and ‘free’. Many words will sound the same

to us and we may accuse the speaker of mumbling. We may well hear 'six hungry people' as 'six hundred people'!

A hearing assessment will indicate your threshold for hearing (the quietest sounds you can hear) at different frequencies, and the pattern of your hearing loss will be plotted on a graph – an audiogram. You should also have a speech discrimination test. The audiologist will use this information to determine whether you will benefit from using a hearing aid and, if so, to recommend an aid most suitable for you.

For some people, deterioration or damage to parts of the inner ear, or to the auditory pathway to the brain, means that they are unable to hear clearly, regardless of amplification – they may find it difficult to discriminate speech sounds even when wearing an aid. If you have this problem your audiologist will discuss it with you.

YOUR HEARING AID – A GOOD FRIEND!

All hearing aids amplify and bring the amplified sound directly to your ear. But all hearing aids, even though they may look identical, are not the same.

If your hearing loss happened to be the same for all frequencies, the aid would be designed to amplify all sounds equally – rather like turning up the volume on a TV set. In most cases, however, hearing loss does not occur equally at all frequencies, so your aid will be prescribed for you, to meet your special requirements. It will be programmed and adjusted to compensate for your specific hearing loss and will boost those frequencies where you need most help.

Because your hearing may have deteriorated slowly, over many years, you may not have noticed the gradual loss of quality in the sounds you hear. For most people, an aid will give more distinct sounds, sharper than the muffled ones to which you have become accustomed. Everyday sounds – your footsteps, the clock ticking, papers rustling, other people's voices, and especially your own voice, will sound different.

You should welcome this new clarity, just as you would welcome the sharper images which glasses produce for those with impaired vision. However, it takes time to become used to the change and you will have to allow yourself a period of adjustment.

A good plan is to begin by listening in a quiet situation at home. Listen to your own voice and try to identify the sounds around you. A quiet conversation with a friend is the next step. Then try listening to TV or the radio, followed by joining in

a conversation with two or three people. Give yourself a rest when you become tired of coping with the new sounds.

When you feel comfortable with this, try to visit to the cinema, theatre, or church. If your aid has a Telecoil – a T-switch – you will be able to benefit from the audio induction loop systems installed in many public venues. Last of all should be a visit to the club, restaurant or noisy social gathering.

If you have a newer aid, which may have more than one program, or if you are using a remote control unit, experiment with the different programs and controls – find out which ones give you the best help in different listening situations.

If at any time your hearing aid causes undue discomfort, or it you feel that it does not significantly improved your ability to hear, you should go back to your audiologist or hearing aid supplier and explain your difficulties. The aid itself, or the ear mould, may need adjusting. It may take several visits to achieve the best results.

GOOD LISTENING TACTICS

If we are to continue to function well in a hearing world, we should make the most of our residual hearing. After an initial adjustment period, you should aim to wear your hearing aid for all waking hours.

In some situations you will gain immediate benefits. For hearing aid wearers, however, some listening conditions are more difficult. By keeping a positive attitude, and adopting the following simple listening techniques, you will be able to take part in most social activities and use your aid comfortably and effectively.

- Volume: It is most likely that your aid will be adjusted to amplify some frequencies more than others. Because of this, any major increase in volume will tend to cause an imbalance, and the sound you hear will be distorted. Increasing the volume will also amplify unwanted background noise- you will want to avoid this. As a general rule, it is not wise to vary the volume for the setting assigned by your audiologist. Note that this does not apply when using the T-Switch. It is often necessary to increase the volume when switching to the 'T' position.

- In Crowded & Noisy Social Situations: To minimise background noise, turn the volume to the lowest practical level. Place yourself as far as possible form the sources of interference such as loudspeakers. If necessary, move to another venue for conversation – into another room, the hallway or into the garden. If you have an aid with T-witch facility, you will be able to make use of personal communication devices to supplements your aid in these more difficult listening environments.