



HEARING MATTERS AUSTRALIA

Support from real life experience

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WHAT TO EXPECT FROM A HEARING ASSESSMENT

Hearing assessments are used to identify if you have a hearing loss; how hearing loss is progressing; what type of hearing loss you have; and in some cases can indicate the need for medical investigations of possible underlying conditions causing hearing to change.

There are many options for hearing assessments, and many serve specific purposes.

In this information sheet, we define different types of hearing assessment, so you can be well informed about what type of assessment you have had and what further tests may be available to give more information about your hearing.

Free hearing tests

Free hearing tests are advertised by hearing clinics, most often to entice you to that clinic. Free hearing tests are usually basic screening measures that may result in the staff member telling you that you need a full assessment. Free hearing tests are usually funded by hearing device sales. Free tests are not usually full tests of hearing as required to diagnose the nature of your hearing difficulty.

Some clinics may offer a free hearing test for a short while – such as during Hearing Awareness Week, as a contribution to the community, or at special events.

Self tests of hearing

Many apps are downloadable to devices (phones, tablets, or computers) that allow you to test your own hearing. You need to be in a quiet environment. Some apps and online hearing tests are marketing tools, in that at the end, you are required to provide your contact details or are directed straight through to one particular clinic. Be aware that this is the case. Be aware too that an accurate hearing assessment requires a very quiet environment, calibrated equipment and earphones – so most tests conducted in a normal environment are subject to error. Comprehensive tests of hearing require equipment and measures that are not typically available on phones, tablets, or computers, so at best these apps can only estimate or guess what type of hearing loss you may have.

Hearing checks

Hearing checks are usually questionnaires or checklists to identify if you are having difficult hearing in noisy situations, in quiet situations, over the telephone and so on. Many are used for marketing by businesses. Hearing checks cannot provide you with an accurate assessment of type and degree of hearing loss.

Information sheets are shared by HMA as a service to members and those in the community who have an interest in hearing loss. Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information provided, however HMA accepts no responsibility for any adverse consequences arising from the contents of these sheets.

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Contact HMA with queries or amendments.



Hearing screening

A hearing screening test is a very quick test of hearing, usually conducted in a quiet room under earphones, with calibrated equipment and a qualified professional (nurse audiometrist, audiometrist, or audiologist) conducting the test. Tones are presented at a set level and the test determines whether they can be detected or not. Hearing screening rules out hearing loss but does not provide any information about an existing hearing loss.

Basic hearing assessment

A basic hearing assessment is the start to any assessment of your hearing by a university qualified audiologist, TAFE qualified audiometrist or a nurse who has specialised in audiometry. A basic hearing assessment includes the following:

1. Taking your history – which means you telling the professional about what concerns you have about your hearing, your medical history, what types of work and/or social activities you undertake, any associated conditions like tinnitus (ringing in your ears) or dizziness. You will be asked about family history of hearing loss, noise exposure, ear infections, and any other information that may be relevant to your concerns.
2. The audiologist or audiometrist will look inside each of your ears.
3. Conducting the hearing testing in a sound-controlled environment (a booth or at least with special cupped earphones that cut out background noise).
4. Tests which involve responding to tones and words. A noise might be used to mask out the ear that is not being tested. Sounds and words might be too soft to hear. The audiologist or audiometrists will identify the softest sounds you can hear in each ear.
5. Tests of middle ear function, which will be carried out unless there is a clinical reason not to – which involves pumping air into each ear and measuring the response of the ear. This test will not require a response from you and may be slightly uncomfortable.

The audiologist will be able to identify if any hearing loss is present, what degree of hearing loss, the type of hearing loss, and what your next steps should be (i.e., further testing, referral for specialist medical opinion, hearing rehabilitation that may include hearing devices, or monitoring).

You should be able to request a copy of your hearing test results. However, if you seek a second opinion, the second audiologist or audiometrist will want to repeat the testing as they will want to be sure of the accuracy and repeatability of any results obtained.

A full basic hearing evaluation should take at least 45 minutes. The professional conducting the test should be qualified in audiology or audiometry. Their time needs to be paid for. In some cases, private health funds may pay in part for the assessment. If an audiologist is requested to carry out the assessment by an ENT specialist, Medicare may cover the cost of the assessment, or part thereof. Some general practitioners may request hearing assessments under a Chronic Disease Management Plan that also falls under Medicare. Some public hospitals will offer hearing assessment services that are either free to the public or billed to Medicare.



Advanced diagnostic hearing assessment

An advanced diagnostic assessment can be carried out by a university qualified audiologist. Advanced tests of auditory function might be carried out to specify what part of the hearing system is not functioning normally. Advanced diagnostic hearing testing can involve tests that measure the brain's response to sound, via electrodes placed on the scalp and in the region of the ears. Other advanced tests may involve investigating how each ear responds to loud sound, how clear speech is at higher intensities, or how individual parts of the ear and hearing system are reacting to sound.

Advanced tests are carried out after a basic hearing assessment, if the results are either unclear or indicate patterns that show that further information from specialised testing will help with either a diagnosis of a particular condition or planning a rehabilitation program.

Specialised audiological assessments

Specialised audiological assessments can be carried out by university qualified audiologists, or others with specialised training. Specialised assessments investigate one or more aspects of hearing or associated conditions.

Examples of specialised audiological assessments include:

Auditory processing assessments

These tests determine if information from both ears is being filtered and combined at different stages of a complex auditory pathway. Tests may involve listening to very fast speech, speech presented in different types and levels of noise, sentence tests where different parts are sent to either ear, memory for sound and speech, and the ability to fill in missing gaps. Auditory processing may be tested with a combination of physiological measures (tested with electrodes on the scalp that provide patterns of brain activity) and behavioural measures (where the person being tested must respond and participate in tasks). Specific tests conducted may depend on the reason for carrying out the specialised assessment.

Tinnitus

Assessments of tinnitus (ringing in the ear) to determine what intervention may be suitable, or to monitor effectiveness of intervention may be carried out. This may involve matching the type of sound experienced as tinnitus and the loudness of the tinnitus. Some tests may seek to see if the tinnitus can be masked with other sounds. Usually, a tinnitus assessment will include a questionnaire to establish the extent to which tinnitus is affecting lifestyle and functioning.

Vestibular Assessment

Assessment of vestibular function is carried out to assess the vestibular (balance) system that results from an interaction between the semicircular canals in the inner ears and the brain. A series of tests is usually carried out involving tracking lights and stimulating dizziness through using temperature changes in the ear. Ear Nose and Throat Specialists and Neurologists often use vestibular assessment results to help diagnose ear and brain related conditions.