

Health Notes by Evelyn Ames Choosing Hearing Aid Dispensers

Frequent advertisements come in the mail or are inserts in newspapers/magazines that promote hearing devices. A recent insert in the local newspaper promoted a “Three Day Special: Your Key to Better Hearing with the all new” using such puffery-type words as “customized exclusively for you,” “pioneering advances in science,” “world leader,” and “innovation in engineering.” The FTC (Federal Trade Commission) defines puffery as a “term frequently used to denote the exaggerations reasonably to be expected of a seller as to the degree of quality of his product, the truth or falsity of which cannot be precisely determined” (FTC). **What can the consumer do** to educate and protect oneself from fraudulent or misleading promotional ads for hearing aid devices? With more than 35 million Americans experiencing some degree of hearing loss, the consumer division of the FTC suggests that people first “understand the various types of hearing loss, the differences between a hearing aid and a personal sound amplification device,” and what to consider when shopping for the most appropriate product. <http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0168-buying-hearing-aid>

Common types of hearing loss: **Conductive hearing loss** involves outer ear, the middle ear, or both (usually results from earwax blockage from earwax, fluid in the middle ear, or a punctured eardrum). **Sensorineural — or “nerve” — hearing loss** involves damage to inner ear, caused by disease, illness, age, injury from exposure to noise or certain medicines, or a genetic disorder and may be corrected with a hearing aid. **Mixed hearing loss** is a combination of sensorineural and conductive hearing loss. “Only a small portion of adult hearing problems, like ear infections and middle ear diseases, are medically or surgically treatable.” If the loss can’t be treated medically or surgically, a hearing aid may be beneficial.

Hearing Aid Device: “A hearing aid is a small electronic device worn in or behind the ear. The device has three parts: a microphone, an amplifier, and a speaker. It receives sound through the microphone, which converts the sound to electrical signals and sends them to the amplifier. The amplifier increases the power of the signals and sends them to the ear through the speaker” (FTC). Devices do not work unless users have some ability to hear.

Sound Advice from the FTC:

- Price is a factor, but it’s not the only one to consider when you are determining your best option for an assistive hearing device. A more expensive device isn’t always better for your needs.
- Don’t patronize a business that dismisses the need for a medical examination prior to the purchase of a hearing aid. Only two types of people are authorized to measure hearing loss and fit and dispense hearing aids in the U.S.: an audiologist and a hearing aid dispenser. “The credentials for becoming a hearing aid dispenser vary by state, but typically involve working as an apprentice to an already certified dispenser for some period of time and passing a test about hearing aids. A hearing aid dispenser is not an audiologist and does not have to have a college degree related to hearing loss” (FTC). The audiologist has at least a master’s degree but generally has an Au.D. or Ph.D.
- A contract (e.g., trial period, warranty, loaner, and total price) is explained at the FTC web site. If a person cannot afford a hearing aid, it is recommended the person contact the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders for information about organizations that offer financial assistance. <http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/Pages/default.aspx>
- To report problems with medical devices, including hearing aids, contact the FDA [via the MedWatch program](#) (MedWatch Online Reporting Form 3500).

A Personal Sound Amplification Product is a device used by people with normal hearing to amplify hard-to-hear sounds. The device may be helpful if one is trying to hear table conversation while eating in a crowded or noisy restaurant.

Check <http://www.hearinglossweb.com/tech/ha/ind/ind.htm#fda> if you want to know about reports and governmental actions relating to various organizations (e.g., UnitedHealth, Online Hearing Tests) and their attempts to provide hearing devices to consumers. Check Western Washington University’s Speech-Language-Hearing Clinic at <http://www.wvu.edu/csd/speechlanguagehearingclinic.shtml>.