



# WisTech Assistive Technology Program

Department of Health and Family Services, Division of Disability and Elder Services

---

## Helpful Information for Obtaining Hearing Aids

By *Ralph Pelkey, WisTech Assistive Technology Specialist (608) 267-9091*

A **hearing aid** (also referred to as a hearing instrument) is an electronic device that brings amplified sound to the ear. The hearing aid usually consists of a microphone, amplifier, and receiver.

### Steps to Obtaining a Hearing Aid

The decision to obtain a hearing aid should be made with the consultation of a physician to determine whether the person's hearing loss cannot be improved by medical or surgical treatment. The decision also requires that the individual is fully informed and freely chooses the option of sound amplification. Requests for hearing aids require a physician's order if Medicaid or other health plans are expected to cover the cost of the device.

**Selecting a Vendor** – The first step in selecting a hearing aid is to contact the person's primary physician or other health care provider who can suggest a vendor to provide a complete and accurate hearing evaluation. Audiologists and Hearing Instrument Specialists can conduct a hearing aid evaluation according to the limitations discussed in this article under "Providers of Hearing Aids".

**Evaluation** - The process of obtaining a hearing aid should include a complete and accurate audiological evaluation. It is important that this evaluation include testing of hearing thresholds and a discussion of the individual's lifestyle and habits, listening requirements and communication needs.

The evaluation helps to determine the type of hearing aid that is best suited to the individual and whether one or two hearing aids are needed. Normally, if an individual has a hearing loss in both ears, they will hear better with two hearing aids. Binaural (2) hearing aids help to localize sounds, improve hearing in noisy settings, and provide a more natural sound quality.

During an evaluation, an impression is taken for the formation of an ear mold. A custom ear mold helps to securely hold the hearing aid in the ear and facilitate the direction of sound into the ear canal.

**Fitting** - After the hearing aid has been fabricated and is ready, an appointment is made for a hearing aid fitting. During this visit, the ear mold and hearing aid are checked and verified for proper fit and comfort. The hearing aid is adjusted or programmed to meet the individual's specific hearing needs. The individual should get information and instruction in the proper care, use, and maintenance of the hearing aid during the fitting

appointment. At this point it is important to consider whether to pay to insure the hearing aid(s) against loss and accidental damage.

**Follow-up** - A follow-up consultation generally occurs about one month after the hearing aid fitting and the individual begins using the hearing aid. This is an important step to allow for any fine-tuning of the hearing aid and to verify that the device is working properly. It is standard practice of Wisconsin providers to allow for a 30-day return policy for hearing aids, however it is not required by law.

Wisconsin Medicaid requires that a performance check be conducted before the provider can submit claims to be paid for a hearing aid. Regardless of the method of payment, it is the responsibility of the hearing aid user to arrange for a performance check before 30-days have elapsed since the fitting.

It is often valuable to have additional follow-up appointments within the first year of a hearing aid's use to be certain that the device is performing properly. Prior to the expiration of the customary one-year service warranty, it is advisable for an individual to schedule a follow-up appointment in anticipation of any potential problems.

## **Providers of Hearing Aids**

Hearing aids are provided by Audiologists and by Hearing Instrument Specialists.

An **Audiologist** is a health care professional who is trained to evaluate hearing loss and related disorders. Audiologists hold a minimum of a master's degree, have completed a one-year internship, and are required to hold a state license. They usually work in a clinic, hospital, school, or private practice. The federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA Sec. 801.420) recommends that children with a hearing loss be evaluated by an audiologist due to the risk of problems in language development, education, and social growth.

The clinical and diagnostic tools of an audiologist help ensure the accuracy and appropriateness of assessments in the case of individuals who may be difficult to test. All children, and adults who have dementia, developmental disabilities, or physical disabilities, will benefit from the services of an audiologist due to their extensive education and training. An audiologist is also better able to act as part of a professional treatment team that may include a psychologist, speech therapist and physician.

A **Hearing Instrument Specialist** (Hearing Aid Dealer) is licensed to test hearing in adults for the purpose of fitting hearing aids and may also dispense hearing aids prescribed by an audiologist. They are required to have a high school diploma or GED, complete a one-year work experience under the supervision of a hearing instrument specialist, and pass a written exam. In accordance with Wisconsin Administrative Code DHFS 107.24(3)(h), hearing instrument specialists are prohibited from providing service to Medicaid recipients who are 21 years of age or younger, individuals who are behaviorally or cognitively impaired, or have special needs.

## Types of Hearing Aids

Several sizes or styles of hearing aids are available. The appropriate fitting will depend on a number of factors including the size and shape of the ear canal and the degree of hearing loss. **BTE** (Behind the Ear) is favored by many adults but is commonly used for young children because it is larger, can include safety controls, and does not pose as great a choking risk. It is often the least expensive hearing aid style. Other styles include **ITE** (In the Ear), **ITC** (In the Canal), and **CIC** (Completely in the Canal). Pricing varies on these styles, with the smaller aids having a greater cost.

Hearing Aid circuitry has an effect on the quality of sound and the cost. **Conventional hearing aids** (non-programmable analog) amplify all sounds at the same amount of volume. Low bass sounds are amplified with the same amount of volume as high treble sounds. **Programmable analog hearing aids** allow for more flexibility because they contain a computer chip that can be programmed to amplify different sounds at different levels to meet the individual's needs. **Programmable digital hearing aids** convert the sound to a digital signal that can be adjusted based on the individual's hearing loss and characteristics of incoming sounds. They also can be adjusted for loud and soft sounds without the use of a volume control.

Hearing aids can also be equipped with advanced features such as directional microphones and telecoils. Directional microphones allow the hearing aid to pull in or block out sounds from various directions. A telecoil is technology that allows the person with the hearing aid to use compatible phones without feedback and other advanced technology such as FM systems (see below).

## Assistive Listening Devices

An **Assistive Listening Device** (ALD) is a device, other than a hearing aid, that improves listening for individuals with hearing loss. An ALD can be used with or without hearing aids to overcome the negative effects of distance, background noise, and poor acoustics.

Examples of cordless, wireless ALDs include personal **FM systems** that operate on a special frequency. FM systems are often used in a classroom, theaters, places of worship, or public meetings. **Infrared systems** are often used in the home with TV sets, where the user has a receiver adjusted to his or her desired volume, while others in the room can listen at a comfortable volume level. **Pocket Talkers**, (often with cords) are a low cost option consisting of a portable amplifier with a microphone and earphones that can improve comprehension in one-to-one conversations.

## Funding for Hearing Aids

The cost of the hearing aid should be taken into consideration along with selecting the device that is most appropriate for an individual's hearing loss. The following is a guide to funding options:

<b>Funding Source</b>	<b>Coverage</b>	<b>Contact</b>
Medicare	Hearing aids are not a covered service	N/A
Medicaid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hearing aids and assistive listening devices are covered services with prior authorization</li> <li>• Also covered: hearing exams, hearing aid batteries</li> </ul>	Audiologists and Hearing Instrument Specialists – see Medicaid website for policy and guidelines <a href="http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/medicaid/updates/provtype/37audiol.htm#medicaid">http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/medicaid/updates/provtype/37audiol.htm#medicaid</a>
Private insurance and managed care plans	Hearing aids are sometimes covered with a co-pay requirement.	Check with insurance carrier for policy coverage and limitations
Community Options Programs and/or Medicaid Waivers	Hearing aids are covered if they are part of the individualized service plan	County or Tribal Long Term Care Coordinator
Other financial assistance and grants	Available through a number of private foundations and associations	Contact the author for a list of agencies and addresses (see reference below)
WisLoan program	Low interest loan program to pay for assistive technology, including hearing aids and assistive listening devices	See reference below for contact information

## **Medicaid Coverage of Hearing Aids**

Wisconsin Medicaid has clarified policies and announced changes (effective March 1, 2003) in coverage of hearing aids. These changes will likely result in Medicaid recipients gaining access to a wider variety of hearing aids. Medicaid has:

- increased the maximum allowable fees for hearing aids, ALDs, and related procedures,
- adopted national coding in accordance with the Health Care Procedure Coding System (HCPCS),
- expanded the available codes to include digital and programmable hearing aids.

Wisconsin Medicaid requires that Prior Authorization (PA) be obtained for hearing aids according to their established guidelines. PAs for programmable and digital hearing instruments must include documentation that the recipient's lifestyle, cognitive abilities, physical health and other factors are suitable for the successful use of the device.

Medicaid will pay for repairs of a hearing aid if the repair cost is less than the replacement cost. Also, Medicaid assigns a life expectancy of three years to hearing aids.

Replacement of hearing aids due to loss or damage before the three years have elapsed may be approved if appropriate justification is provided on the PA request.

Providers are required to cover any hearing aid with a one-year warranty. Medicaid will not pay for the cost of extended warranties beyond the first year or for insurance. Medicaid providers are required by law to accept Medicaid reimbursement as payment in full, and cannot charge recipients directly for any cost other than the co-payment amount (presently \$3.00)

***Freedom of Choice*** - Wisconsin Medicaid allows freedom of choice for recipients to be able to select their own audiologist or hearing aid dealer. For this reason, upon approval of a prior authorization request for a hearing aid, the Medicaid recipient will receive an informational letter and a copy of the approved PA that they can take to the Medicaid provider of their choice.

### **Further Information:**

#### **Wisconsin Division of Health and Family Services Bureau for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing:**

<http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/sensory/>

#### **WisTech:**

<http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/wistech/index.htm>

#### **Medicaid** service codes and fee schedule:

<http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/medicaid3/updates/2003/2003pdfs/2003-06.pdf>

#### **Wisconsin Sound Beginnings** – Universal Newborn Hearing Screening Program

[http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/DPH\\_BFCH/cshcn/sndBegning.htm](http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/DPH_BFCH/cshcn/sndBegning.htm)

#### **American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA):**

<http://www.asha.org/index.cfm>

#### **WisLoan**, (low interest loans for assistive technology)

Patti Kraemer, WisLoan Coordinator at IndependenceFirst

Voice/TTY 414-291-7520 ext 8306, or Toll Free: 1-877-463-3778

Email: [Pkraemer@independencefirst.org](mailto:Pkraemer@independencefirst.org)

<http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/wistech/wisloan.htm>

For a list of **private funding sources** for hearing aid grants, please contact Ralph Pelkey, Bureau of Aging and Long Term Care Resources, 1 W. Wilson St., Rm. 450, PO Box 7851, Madison, WI 53707-7851 (608) 267-9091, or email: [pelkerj@dhfs.state.wi.us](mailto:pelkerj@dhfs.state.wi.us).