

## **Hearing Loss**

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# **The Cost of Hearing Aids: A Discussion With the Experts**

*Edited by Barbara Kelley*

As hearing aid technology has progressed and prices have increased, it is time for a 2005 response from industry leaders, organizations interested in hearing health care, and those in the field with unique opinions and insight.

From the consumer viewpoint, hearing aids are an expensive investment, most often not covered by health insurance. Since SHHH's beginning, our members have asked the direct and simple question: "Why Do Hearing Aids Cost So Much?"

Some go on to ask: "Why can you buy a powerful personal computer for much less than a hearing aid, when computers are far more sophisticated than hearing aids?"

We know the answers are far from simple. Over time, we have reported in *Hearing Loss* what is involved in the purchase and servicing of hearing aids. For 25 years, SHHH has encouraged the use of hearing aids and assistive listening devices in our editorial, public policy statements, and position papers. We, in no way, want to discourage anyone from getting the best hearing care they can afford. But, in this age of increased consumer awareness, we are still repeatedly asked this same question about cost.

We asked the respondents for direct and informative answers to help consumers in their quest for better hearing. Three of the respondents chose to answer each question with direct answers. Two respondents chose to write a narrative encompassing all their answers. Either way, we are grateful for the thoughtful responses by the experts.

## **Questions Posed by SHHH**

1. Why do hearing aids cost what they do? Please give a simple breakdown of the costs.
2. Do people who dispense hearing aids devote more evaluation, counseling and follow-up time to people purchasing the more expensive aids? If so, does this mean that people purchasing less expensive aids are being deprived of necessary services? If not, then at the dispenser level, what justifies the

higher prices for the more costly aids?

3. Is there any objective research evidence, other than the contribution of specific features (like directional microphones), that demonstrates that people actually hear better with the more expensive aids than the less expensive ones? (Assuming both are digital aids.)

4. Once the research and development costs for advanced technology are recouped, are subsequent savings passed on to dispensers?

Barbara Kelley is editor-in-chief of Hearing Loss and can be reached at [bkelly@hearingloss.org](mailto:bkelly@hearingloss.org).

## **The International Hearing Society Responds**

*By Alan L. Lowell*

*The International Hearing Society (IHS), located in Livonia, Michigan, is the non-profit, professional association that represents Hearing Instrument Specialists in the United States, Canada, Japan, and several other countries. Founded in 1951, the Society continues to recognize the need for promoting and maintaining the highest possible standards for its members in the best interest of the consumer.*

[www.ihsinfo.org](http://www.ihsinfo.org)  
800/521-5247 (Hearing Aid Helpline)

### **Answer to Question 1**

The cost of a high quality pair of hearing aids today is partly due to the number of aids that are sold annually. While it is estimated that approximately 28 million Americans have hearing loss, only 20 percent wear hearing aids. This ranks hearing aids as one of our nation's most underutilized medical devices. In spite of this, the manufacturing community continues to make major expenditures and advancements in the research and development of customized hearing aids.

The latest advancements in hearing aid technology offer unparalleled benefits. Digital sound quality, computerized programming, and user options make hearing and listening in noisy situations more comfortable and more effective than ever before.

When comparing the cost of hearing aids to other consumer products, the size of the market must be taken into account. In other words, how many hearing aids will be purchased compared to eyeglasses, televisions, computers, refrigerators, stoves, etc? Several of these products are used

daily by virtually each and every one of us. In contrast, hearing aids have much smaller market appeal. Interestingly, when the cost of customized hearing aids is compared to highly inflated industries such as homes and automobiles over time; the cost for advanced hearing aid technology is only slightly higher.

Regardless of the size of the market, consumers need access to qualified and licensed hearing health professionals who conduct business and provide services from well-equipped and staffed facilities. The costs, too numerous to list, associated with maintaining a viable business or practice also must be factored into the sales price of hearing aids.

## **Answer to Question 2**

Regardless of the type, model, size and technology, the comprehensive hearing evaluation and process to determine hearing aid candidacy is generally the same for all patients. Selection, fitting, counseling, follow-up, and post-fitting management, each of which are key elements in the process, regardless of technology, must be considered when discussing the retail prices of hearing aids.

For example, a first-time user or an experienced wearer fitted with digital programmable hearing aids for the first time, may require numerous office visits to ensure optimal results. This can be a lengthy process since computer programming provides a vast number of fine-tuning possibilities which, in part, makes these types of aids more expensive.

Patients with more basic technology often have the same issues as those who wear the more advanced hearing aids. Addressing these issues may take the same number of office visits to resolve, but may require a somewhat shorter appointment time. Regardless of technology, the adjustment period is similar for either group. Whether wearing advanced or basic technology, patient adherence to a regimen of periodic routine visits for general care and maintenance will ensure maximum benefit from the device. The costs associated with these visits normally are included in the selling price.

If history is any indicator of the future, the industry will continue to search for messages that will motivate those among us who have not yet sought treatment for hearing loss to take action. Manufacturers will continue producing cutting-edge technology enabling us to hear and understand more comfortably and effectively. This also means that new and updated software programs to support the technology will need to be developed on an ongoing basis.

Although it's unlikely that prices will fall dramatically over the next five years due to future research and development of both hardware and software, the prices of hearing aids will continue to be driven by market dynamics.

However, until we can convince the vast number of people with hearing loss who don't wear hearing aids that today's hearing aids really do make a difference, these costs will continue to be absorbed by those of us who do enjoy the benefits of amplification!

### **Answer to Question 3**

Speaking from a dispensing perspective, other than on-site verification testing, it is difficult to measure objective comparisons. There are significant variables that can impact the results or the perceived benefit that wearers achieve with their aids.

For example, rarely will you hear someone wearing corrective lenses comment that they have difficulty seeing because the light is either too dim or too bright or that the images aren't sharp enough. On the other hand, hearing aid wearers constantly evaluate how good their aids are based on how they hear in noisy situations. Today's advanced technology is developed to improve hearing in noise. And for most, there is a significant improvement. However, when comparing basic vs. advanced technologies, features must also be considered.

Today's advanced hearing aid technology is feature-rich. Think in terms of what television was like before remote control. You couldn't view two different channels at the same time, mute the program, or for that matter make any adjustments without going to the TV. The newer technology didn't just make the picture sharper and clearer, it made viewing TV much more comfortable, enjoyable and convenient.

In contrast to basic analog technology, digital hearing aids produce a cleaner sound. In most cases, computerization and programming enable multiple fitting algorithms and adjustments, both for the hearing care professional and the hearing aid user. The useful lifespan is not only longer but is equally effective since the new fitting matrix, which is similar to a prescription for corrective lenses, can be programmed for the patient's hearing at any time. Of course, as with anything else, nothing lasts forever. Technology is constantly advancing, and at some point change is either necessary or desired.

When selecting an eye-care professional for something as important as my vision, I wasn't guided by who would be the least expensive, although that was a consideration, but rather who was the most qualified and would utilize the best state of the art materials. Those of us who need and seek hearing help have a similar choice. It should be very comforting to know that we can select from a wide range of technologies and prices that fit our needs, preferences and budget.

### **Answer to Question 4**

It is difficult to predict what, if any, savings will be passed on to dispensers after research and development costs are recouped. This can best be answered directly by hearing aid manufacturers.

What is certain is that the manufacturing community will continue to relentlessly pursue the development of the finest, most technologically advanced hearing instruments of our time. Of equal importance is to advance and streamline the administrative, logistical and other product support processes, all of which contribute to the cost of hearing aids.

Contrary to many perceptions and unlike other industries, close observers of the hearing aid industry have noticed a slow but steady decline in prices since the mid to late 1990's, when programmable and digital hearing aids first emerged.

The mechanics in delivering many of the newer hearing aids consumed a great deal of the industry's resources for education and training of the dispensing community. This also drove the prices for hearing aids higher. A decade later, dispensers are up to speed and synchronized with manufacturing, greatly reducing the time needed to spend on training.

Will the purchase price of hearing aids continue to decline? When contemplating the answer, what must be considered are the rising costs of virtually everything else we use in our daily lives. We need only look as far as what it costs to purchase a gallon of milk or gasoline. However, if trends are any indicators for the future, consumers of hearing aids have a lot to look forward to.

*Alan L. Lowell, BC-HIS, ACA is president of Alan Lowell Seminars, Inc., Encore Hearing Consultants, LLC, and vice president of Professional Hearing Aid Centers, Inc. Licensed in 1975, he has served both at the state and national level, including service as chair of the National Board for Certification in Hearing Instrument Sciences, and as past president of the International Hearing Society.*

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