

The Case for Avoiding Internet and Mail Order Hearing Instrument Purchases



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The extremely significant decision to pursue hearing care marks an important milestone in the improvement of one's quality of life through improved communication. There are many options available to you, and it is crucial to your success that you make the best decision for your care.

The pursuit of hearing care should begin with a face-to-face consultation with a hearing specialist. This includes a patient history review, ear canal inspection, testing and a thorough explanation of the potential benefits of amplification to the patient. During this consultation, the appropriate level of hearing technology and hearing instrument style will be discussed. These are based on the level and type of hearing loss, lifestyle considerations and physical properties of the ear. When hearing instruments are agreed upon, the hearing specialist would then typically order the appropriate device(s). If a custom fit instrument or earmold is needed, ear impressions would be taken at this time.

When the hearing instruments arrive, the specialist inspects them closely, listens to and pre-programs according to the patient's audiogram and then schedules the delivery of the instruments. **The delivery appointment includes verification of a good physical fit to the patient's ear, further programming/fine tuning and feedback calibration tests. The hearing instruments must be connected to the computer and inside the patient's ears during this phase of adjustment.** Counseling is also an important part of the delivery appointment.

A follow-up is usually scheduled for one week later and includes verification testing to help determine if the devices are providing optimal benefits, as well as additional fine tuning based on the test results and patient comments. A second follow-up is suggested for the three-week marker in order to perform more verification tests and potential adjustments, to ensure everything is sounding and fitting as perfectly as possible. After this, ongoing 6-month checkups are recommended for cleaning and checking the performance of the devices. It is important to have a hearing screening each year to determine if the hearing instruments need to be reprogrammed based on any changes in hearing.

If you were to purchase hearing instruments online* or through the mail, you would have to find a hearing care provider who is willing to perform the above services on devices that he or she did not order. This alone can create a challenging situation for you and provider, since the provider would not have the usual relationship with the manufacturer of the hearing instruments. There is now a fourth party involved, making it much more difficult to address potential problems with

the devices (i.e. if instruments need to be exchanged because of defects, etc.). Also, there can be liability issues if something happens to the instruments under the specialist's care, because he or she does not have the same level of flexibility with the manufacturer to resolve problems.

If you are wanting to purchase hearing instruments online or by mail in order to save money, you really should weigh the costs. Even though the price of the device is typically low, the cost of the initial and follow-up care will eventually make the pricing much closer, if not exceeding the bundled pricing offered by the hearing care specialist. Many hearing care providers offer free office visits and programming for the life of the hearing instruments. This could add up to hundreds of dollars if having to pay for each visit, which you would most likely do if purchasing online or by mail.

In summary, the reality is this: In order to achieve the best level of hearing success for the long term, you should be willing to put in some time to allow for the necessary face-to-face testing, fitting, programming, counseling and follow-up care. This way does usually cost more up front, but it also usually covers you for the life of the hearing instruments (i.e. free office visits, cleaning and checkups, programming, screenings, etc.) and creates a good trust-based relationship between you and provider. This also allows for a more customized and personalized level of care, which can address your specific needs and desires more effectively.

***Note: Several major hearing instrument manufacturers have strict policies against the sale of their devices online without face-to-face care being included. However, you should still be aware of the downsides mentioned above.**