

Digital Hearing Aids: What are they and what do they do, and what about the costs?

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Before I begin, let me suggest that it is best not to read this in isolation. Please peruse my other articles first, particularly the articles on what is a hearing loss, compensating strategies, and background noise complaints. If you read these articles first, this article will make more sense.

So, what is a digital hearing aid. To begin with, it is the only “type” of hearing aid sold nowadays. Whether you see a hearing aid sitting behind someone’s ear or sitting in the ear, it is a digital hearing aid. Digital hearing aids have been around for at least ten years now, probably more. Most companies that manufacture them have improved upon their earlier models by leaps and bounds. But what can you expect from them and how are they different from the “old” type of hearing aid, called analog.

Well to begin, digital hearing aids turn regular sound into numbers. If the room your in is loud, the hearing aid will record the loudness and assign it a high number. If the room you’re in is quiet, the hearing aid surveys the situation and records it as a small number. The trick here is that your hearing aid is does this very fast and once it stores the number in holding, it can manipulate what comes out towards the ear. In other words, there is a very short time lag between what it records and what it sends out to your ear. It is this time lag which could be also thought of as a “decision making moment”, which differentiates today’s digital hearing aids from the old style analog aids. Today’s hearing aids are intelligent or at least that is the idea. They do not simply pick up a sound and make that same sound louder. For example, they may pick up a sound that resembles “wind” and instead of making it louder they make the sound softer so the listener doesn’t hear it.

Depending on how many “decisions” a hearing aid can make by itself, is often the difference between a less expensive digital hearing aid and a more expensive digital hearing aid. As a general rule, the more decisions a hearing aid makes by itself (i.e. the more digital algorithms it has), the more expensive it becomes. The next article will talk about today’s digital algorithms.

It may seem obvious to many that the more money you pay, the better the instrument. However, it is my experience that money still cannot buy the best instrument. Far more important to the outcome is the person’s own ability to be open to change, added with plenty of patience and practice while they relearn the auditory world. It is best to remember that all hearing aids share the common purpose of providing sounds to the listener that they likely have not heard in years. This reintroduction to sound, whether it is an unusual voice or a group of people talking is new to the users brain. Even the most expensive digital hearing aids cannot and do not avoid amplifying speech sounds, much of which have likely been long forgotten by the listener.

The take home message is that today’s digital hearing aids are nice but they do not give you normal hearing, far from it in many cases. Much more important to most people’s satisfaction with their hearing aid is practice, practice, and practice.