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How to navigate hearing loss and its solutions

By CHRISTY LYNN

Do you ever notice that it's tough to follow a conversation when you are in a space with a lot of background noise, like a crowded restaurant or public meeting? Have you found yourself asking people to repeat themselves or slow down when speaking to you? Are you slowly pumping up the volume on your TV or radio so you don't miss the dialogue in your favorite program?

If so, you may be among the millions of people experiencing hearing loss. According to the Mayo Clinic, roughly one third of people in the United States between the ages of 65 and 75 experience hearing loss; that number jumps to one in two people over the age of 75.

Hearing loss is generally an irreversible process involving the outer or middle ear (called conductive hearing loss), the inner ear (called sensorineural hearing loss), or both.

The anatomical process of hearing operates within a delicate system deep inside the inner ear whereby tiny hairs attached to nerve cells in the cochlea transmit vibrations to the brain and are interpreted as sound.

Over the course of our lives, exposure to loud noises, harsh conditions, ear infections and hereditary factors will damage those tiny hairs, causing them

to become less and less sensitive. By the time a person reaches the later years of life, after countless music concerts, airplane rides, lawns mowed, babies reared and fireworks displays, it's no wonder those little hairs can't keep up!

But despite how common the occurrence or understandable the causes, there is still a kind of stigma that exists around hearing aids that prevents or delays many people from seeking assistance when they start to experience hearing loss. And while hearing loss is clearly a medical condition, most basic healthcare plans do not cover



hearing assistance and therefore patients often face a hefty price for reclaiming some of their hearing.

That may help explain why an estimated 24 million people in the United States have hearing loss and aren't doing anything about it, says Dr. Robert Hartenstein, an audiologist at Audiology Associates in Middlebury and Rutland.

Moreover, with the huge range of services and practices that offer solutions to those facing trouble hearing it can be overwhelming and confusing to navigate the field and figure out what you need and why.

Most agree that the best option for patients is to at least start with a diagnostic

evaluation performed by a doctor of audiology.

"Hearing aids are very individual," says Dr. Julie Bier, one of two audiologists Better Living Audiology of Middlebury and South Burlington. "There are many things that go into making a hearing aid recommendation, and this can only be done by meeting with a professional and reviewing test results and the patient's communication needs."

Most (if not all) audiology practices offer a variety of hearing aids that they will recommend and fit to each patient. However, Dr. Bier cautions that even some professionals and offices work exclusively with certain hearing aid brands and therefore will steer clients

toward those aids rather than another that might in fact be a better fit for them.

"Also, the hearing aid function is limited to how well the professional is able to program it," Bier says. She recommends that patients consider the professional's training and whether they have a full understanding of all of the programming options within the hearing aid to make sure it is programmed accurately to their individual hearing loss.

Additionally, the professional should be able and willing to provide verification (post-fit) measures to ensure that the hearing aid is functioning the way it should in the patient's ear.

"Many professionals are either unable
(See *Hearing loss*, Page 21)



DR. ROBERT HARTENSTEIN



DR. JULIE BIER

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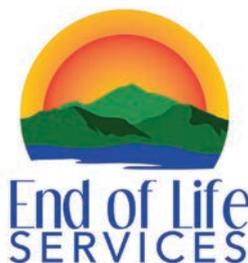


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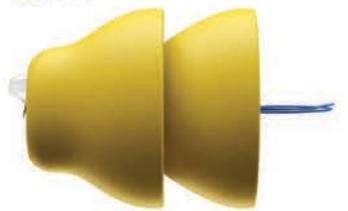
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Hearing loss

(Continued from Page 19)

or unwilling to complete this step due to cost and time," she says. That could be a red flag.

OTHER OPTIONS

While it may be wise to start with a visit to your local audiologist, other options do exist for actually purchasing hearing aid devices that could offer other benefits, particularly if you're on a tight budget.

Hearing aid dispensers, or vendors, are practices that may or may not have trained audiologists on staff, but will rather specialize in knowing a wide variety of hearing aid devices and may offer more competitive pricing.

Bernie Sage is a hearing aid vendor who owns Advanced Hearing Technologies, with an office in Middlebury as well as in eight other Vermont towns.

With 28 years of experience in the industry and hundreds of hours of specialized training on the wide variety of options that his patience face when selecting hearing aids, Sage is proud to offer individualized care to each customer he works with. He offers in-home hearing

tests and works with every brand of hearing aids that he knows about.

"I like to find out what a person's lifestyle is like and consider which aid I think matches their unique needs," he says. His style is to present options to the client and offer free trials with as many devices as a client would like before they make a selection.

"The performance of these devices varies significantly," Sage explains, "with varying numbers of channels and frequencies that each will pick up." The higher the number of channels and the more frequencies offered, the more nuanced and sophisticated the hearing will be.

When facing a purchase of several thousands dollars, it is wise to do your homework on who is offering the best rates, but make sure that you're comparing apples to apples.

Some brands will offer a lower-tech model through retailers like Costco, so while it might be the same brand that your audiologist talked about, the devices are not the same.

However, hearing aid dispensers are



BERNIE SAGE



THIS 3-D EAR scanner is used to create models of the inner ear; which are used in customized earpieces for hearing aids, earplugs and ear protection. Local audiologist Dr. Robert Hartenstein helped develop this digital scanner made by Lantos. The tip is inserted and inflated within the inner ear, allowing the probe at the end to collect precise imagery of the ear canal.

Photo courtesy of Lantos Technologies

often part of buying groups that can negotiate very competitive pricing during special sales events even for the highest end models of hearing aids.

"During a special sales event we can offer hearing aids that might normally be \$5,900 for \$4,000 or so," Sage said.

But while pricing is certainly a concern for many patients, specialists recommend

being careful not to buy just based on price.

While audiologists do go through four years of specialized medical training, vendors do not need any formal education. They do need to complete the state-administered written exam to obtain a license to dispense hearing aids. They

(See Options, Page 26)

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How to travel even when you have limited mobility

(MS) — Many people dream of traveling the world in retirement. Such dreams come true every day. But many more retirees or people nearing retirement fear that their dreams of seeing the world won't be possible due to mobility issues beyond their control. Thankfully, such fears are largely unwarranted.

Various conditions can affect men and women's mobility. Many such issues tend to arise after age 50, prompting many people to believe their post-retirement travel plans will never come to fruition. Conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis; chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or COPD; and heart disease may make it hard for people to travel. But that difficulty doesn't mean aging men and women should resign themselves to a sedentary lifestyle. Though they might require a little extra effort before boarding a plane for parts unknown, the following are a handful of ways that aging men and women with limited mobility can reap the rewards of traveling.

- Contact airlines or other transportation companies if you require special accommodations. The U.S. Department of Transportation notes that passengers are generally not required to provide advanced notice for disability-related accommodations. However, it makes sense to provide such notice anyway. By doing so, men and women with limited mobility can ensure they will have adequate assistance during their trips. When made aware of passengers' mobility issues, airlines or



other travel companies may arrange for wheelchairs to be available at the gates or train platforms so passengers can easily make connecting flights and trains. In addition, advance notice gives companies a chance to provide seating accommodations that can make for a more enjoyable trip.

- Contact security agencies. Security is part of modern travel, so travelers, especially those traveling by air, should

expect to go through security checkpoints during their trips. Travelers with limited mobility should contact the security agencies in their home country as well as those in any country they plan to visit to get an idea of what they can expect. Knowing these guidelines in advance can help people with limited mobility determine if they should arrive extra early so they can make it through security checkpoints in time to

make their flights or trains.

- Contact hotels directly. Each country has its own laws regarding how to accommodate people with physical disabilities or mobility issues, so don't leave things to chance. Before booking a hotel room abroad, travelers with limited mobility should contact the hotel directly to confirm that it can accommodate their needs.

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Exercise and aging: How to work out safely after 50

(MS) — In an ideal world, people young and old exercise each day. But as men and women age, finding time to work out is not so easy.

Commitments to work and family often take precedence over daily exercise. As a result, many people 50 and over might not have exercised regularly or at all in many years. But as children grow up or even move out, people facing down their golden years are often compelled to get back in the gym. That's a wise decision that can increase a person's chances of being healthy and happy in retirement. But before beginning a new exercise regimen, men and women over 50 should take heed of the following safety tips to ensure their efforts are not derailed by accident or injury.

- Speak with your physician. The National Institute on Aging notes that even people with chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes or arthritis can be physically active. However, anyone with such a condition and even those who don't fall into those categories should consult with their physicians and receive a full physical before exercising. Such a consultation and checkup can shed light on any unknown issues, and physicians can offer advice on how to safely manage any problems that may arise.

- Begin with low-intensity exercises. Even if you feel great and have

maintained a healthy weight, don't push yourself too hard at the start. Your body needs time to adjust to physical activity, so choose low-intensity exercises like walking and light strength training so

Even if you feel great and have maintained a healthy weight, don't push yourself too hard at the start. Your body needs time to adjust to physical activity, so choose low-intensity exercises like walking and light strength training so your muscles, tendons and ligaments can adjust.

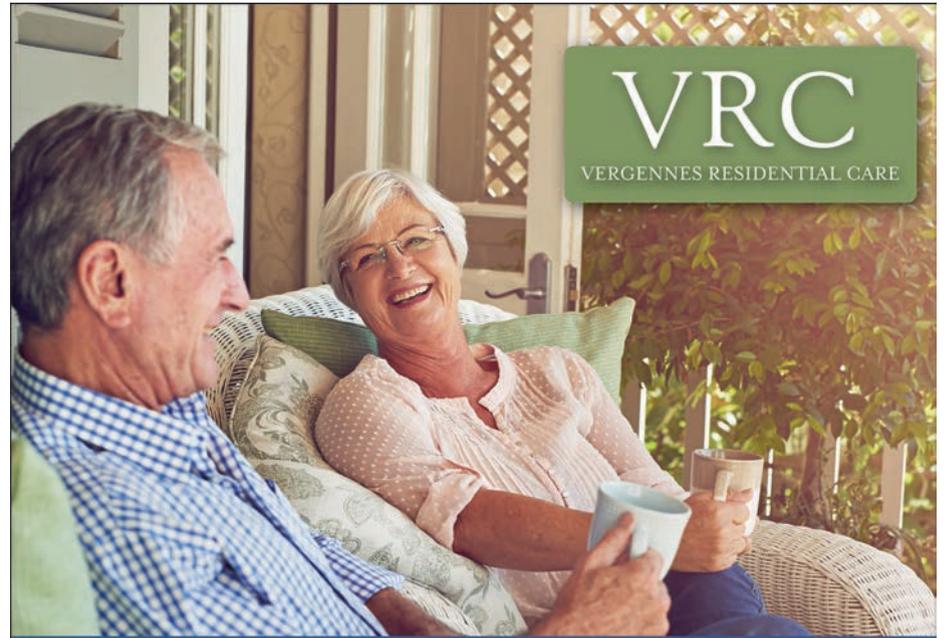
your muscles, tendons and ligaments can adjust. Initially, exercise every other day so your body has ample time to recover between workouts.

- Choose the right places to exercise outdoors. Exercising outside provides the best of both worlds for many people, providing a chance to get healthy all while enjoying the great outdoors. When exercising outdoors, choose areas that are not remote and where others can see you and offer help if you suffer an injury or have an accident. Boardwalks, public parks and outdoor gyms are safer places to work out than wooded areas or other places well off the

beaten path.

- Stay hydrated. The NIA notes that many people lose their sense of thirst as they age. But just because you aren't thirsty does not mean you don't need water, especially while exercising. Water regulates body temperature and lubricates the joints, thereby decreasing your risk of injury during exercise.

Exercising after 50 can help people live healthy well into retirement. But caution must be exercised when aging men and women return to exercise after a long break.



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Learn to sleep like a child again

(MS) — Many adults lament that even if they were solid sleepers in their younger years, by the age of 50, their quality of sleep has unraveled. Some cling to the wisdom that people simply do not need as much sleep as they get older. Even though that is partly true, sufficient sleep is still a vital component of a healthy life.

The National Sleep Foundation recently updated its sleep recommendations per age group to include categories “may be appropriate” and “not recommended.” This includes a range of hours that may be adequate for certain adults. Adults between the ages of 26 and 65 are advised to get seven to nine hours of sleep per evening. However, six hours or 10 hours also may be acceptable. People over the age of 65 need roughly seven to eight hours of sleep each night, though between five and six hours also may be fine. Generally speaking, anything under five hours is not recommended based on data reviewed by sleep experts.

Many older adults do not get enough sleep due to insomnia, states Jack Gardner, MD, a neurologist certified in sleep medicine. They’re concerned about health issues, may have sleep apnea, can experience pain or frequent urination, or may be taking medication that impedes sleep. Dr. Leila Kheirandish-Gozal, director of clinical sleep research at

the University of Chicago, says that, over time, insufficient sleep can impact metabolism, mood, memory, and heart function.

Various strategies can help people get more sleep and enjoy better sleep quality.

- Create a luxury bed environment. Splurge on the largest mattress you can afford and one that is comfortable for both parties (if married/coupled). A roomy bed routinely invites sleep. If you have a restless partner, try two separate beds pushed against each other.

- Consider white noise. The sounds of the house or outdoors may be keeping you up. Many people find that the gentle hum of a fan or a white-noise machine with a calming sound effect makes it easier for them to doze off than complete quiet. It can also block out extraneous noises.

- Keep electronics out of the bedroom. It can be challenging to disconnect from electronics, but it is essential to falling asleep. Even a back-lit text coming through in the wee hours can be enough illumination to disrupt sleep.

- See your doctor. If medications or illnesses are keeping you up, a change in regimen may provide the relief you need.

Older adults can learn the steps to sleeping more soundly and easily.



Babysitting for grandparents

(MS) — Witnessing your children getting older and starting their own lives and families can be bittersweet. There is pride that comes with seeing their successes, but the melancholy of knowing that the years have passed so quickly. Although you may no longer be tucking your children into bed, reading them bedtime stories or bandaging “boo-boos,” when your children have children, the chance to nurture can start anew.

One of the great joys that comes from having older children is the ability to welcome and love grandchildren. Grandchildren are points of light in people’s lives and provide the exuberance and excitement that reminds you of your own youth. Grandparents often are thrilled to be involved in the care and upbringing of their grandkids. Some may also live with or near their grandchildren to help take some pressures off of adult children.

Babysitting is one way that grandparents can be a frequent fixture in their grandkids’ lives. If it’s been some time since you cared for little children, it’s well worth it to take a refresher course in child care.

MAKE SURE IT’S SAFE

Conduct a safety audit of your home if

grandchildren will be coming over to your place. Are outlets secured with covers? Are medications you may be taking out of reach? Do you have gates to block stairs or restrict access to certain rooms? Modifications may be needed.

ASSESS YOUR HEALTH

Chasing after children can be a workout. Be sure you are up for the challenge and have the stamina. If you have any medical conditions that can impair judgment or reaction time, you might want to reconsider babysitting.

TAKE DIRECTIONS

The way you parented may not be the same way your own children parent. Be humble and follow their lead with regard to instructions. Ask about the eating and sleeping habits of the child. You may have to defer to your own children’s guidelines on discipline and behavior.

LEARN WHAT’S NEW

Many things regarding childcare have changed in the last 20 years, including safety laws and guidelines. Be sure you are up to date on these changes. And if you aren’t certain about something, ask. This involves everything from crib bar widths to car seat installation.

Babysitting can be a joyous task for grandparents who are ready for the job.

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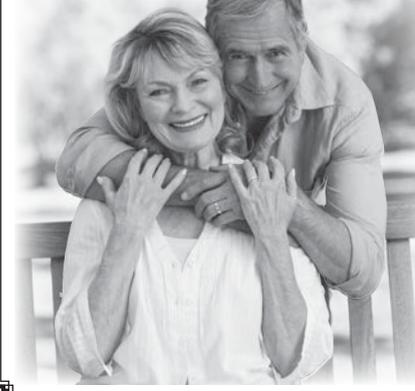
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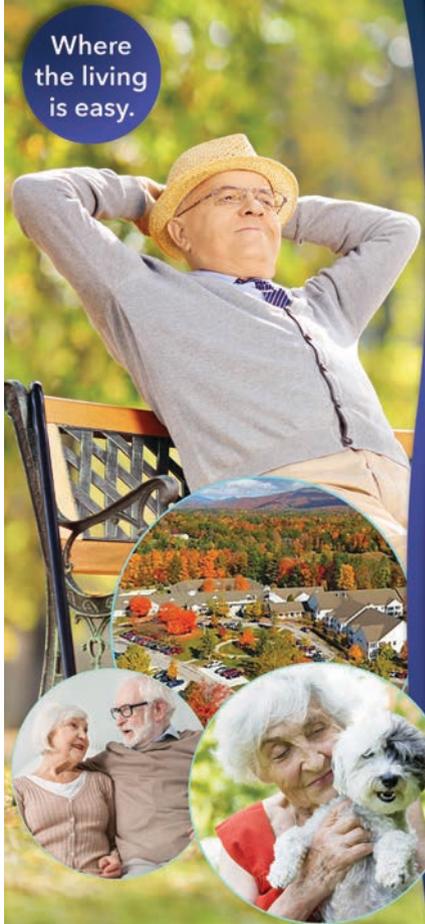
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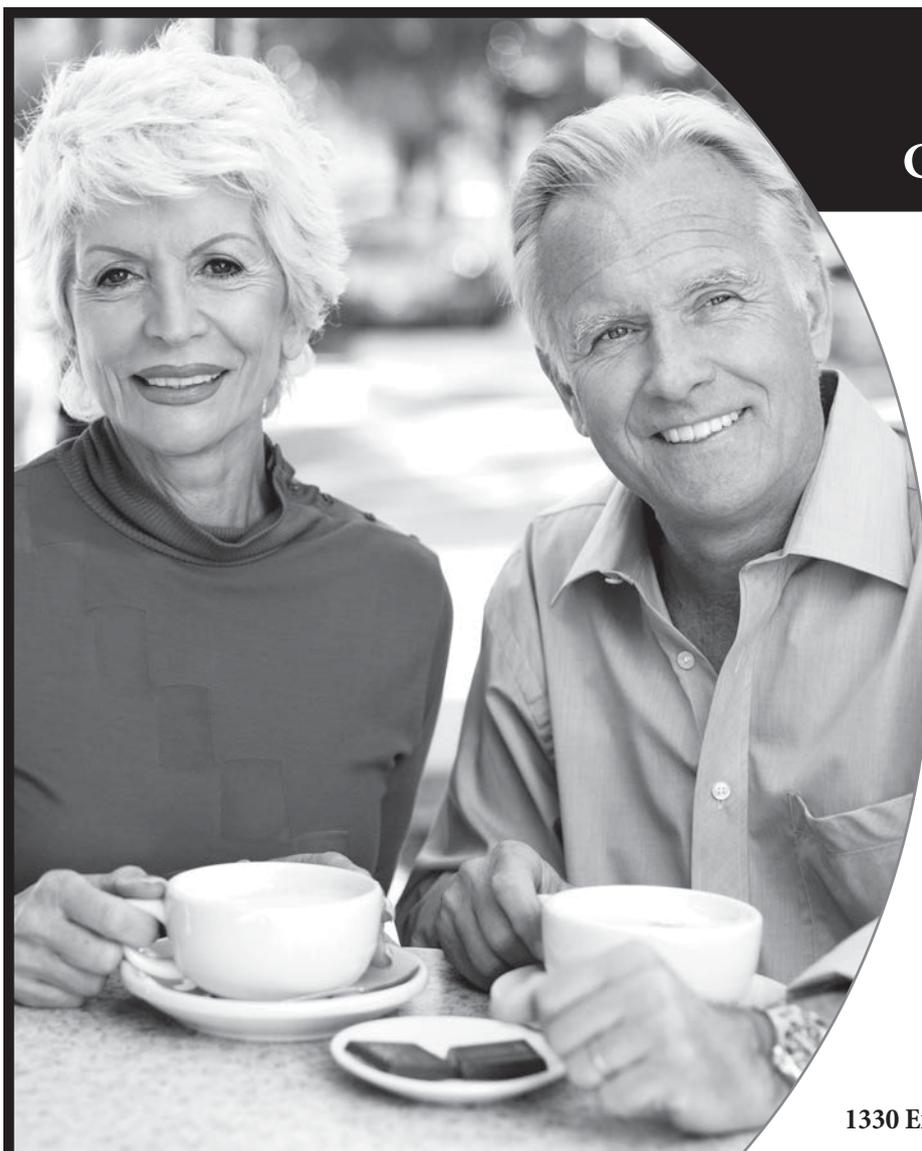


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Options

(Continued from Page 21)

will perform hearing tests for the purposes of fitting hearing aids, but generally cannot provide diagnostic explanations for individual patients and help explain the extent of hearing loss or underlying causes or concerns about the ear canal.

So while most providers have the best intentions at fitting you with an appropriate device, in some cases a patient may be able to avoid a many-thousand-dollar set of hearing aids because their hearing problem was really just due to a buildup of ear wax that was resolved with a simple cleaning.

The hearing aids offered at Audiology Associates cost between \$1,200 and \$6,500 per pair, Hartenstein says, which is a lot of money. Bier agrees. With price tags that can reach up to \$8,000, she says, it's important to get it right.

According to product specifications, devices should last between three and five years, although Hartenstein says he sees patients still happily wearing hearing aids that he fit back in the 1990s. "If they're happy and don't need the new technology, I'm happy," he says.

However, like most things, advancements in hearing aid technology are rapidly changing the industry. And

as Hartenstein put it, "about 95 percent of my patients end up choosing the most expensive option when they experience the difference in their quality of hearing."

EAR SCANNING TECHNOLOGY

Hartenstein happens to be one of the people really in the know when it comes to new technology. In addition to his practice as a Doctor of Audiology, Hartenstein is also a clinical research consultant for companies working on cutting edge technologies for ear scanning.

Until recently, in order to obtain a model of a patient's inner ear, the only option was to make a physical mold using silicone. The process is rather laborious and has some obvious risks

and drawbacks, Hartenstein explained. "Many doctors are understandably nervous about damaging the ear drum and inner ear and therefore don't model deep enough into the ear canal to get the measurements that are most important for custom-fit ear pieces."

However, Hartenstein is working with two companies (Lantos and Otometrics) now offering digital modeling scanners that create a computer model of a patient's inner ear in a matter of seconds using a non-invasive laser device that outputs a near-perfect 3-D image of a patient's ear,

from the inner ear all the way out the canal to the outer ear. While the doctor scans the patient's ear with the laser probe, the model takes shape on the screen right before your eyes.

While these scans can be useful for customized hearing aid tips and devices, they are also useful for many other purposes — noise-cancelling for musicians and DJs, muting for machinery techs, as swim plugs for someone with sensitive ears or simply comfortable ear plugs to muffle the snores of your partner so you can sleep better at night.

Customers may be relieved to learn that scans and models performed by even the most cutting edge tools are usually included in the price tag of the hearing aid or earpiece, rather than added on as additional charges.

Customization of hearing aid devices extends beyond the physical shape of a customizable ear piece as well. These sophisticated devices can be programmed using apps that can adjust the magnification based on location and how broad or targeted your hearing needs are in any particular situation. Users can program specific settings for places that they frequent (for example a favorite restaurant or theater) so that with one click of a button their device hones in on the settings that enable optimum hearing.

"Hearing aids now have Bluetooth technology where they can connect



EAR SCANNER

directly to cell phones," Bier adds, "Not only is this a convenience, but it can help people tremendously when talking on the phone, watching TV and movies, or even listening to music."

"It can really affect quality of life and enjoyment in a meaningful way," Hartenstein says of fitting his patients with proper hearing aids. "Most frequently, the comment I get is 'why didn't I do this sooner,'" he says.

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- 5 Miss key words in a conversation?
- 6 Have difficulty carrying on a conversation on the telephone?
- 7 Often ask people to repeat themselves?
- 8 Have a family member or friend mention you might have a problem with your hearing?



If you answered "yes" to two of these questions, you could benefit from a hearing consultation.



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Robert W. Hartenstein, Au.D.

Dr. Hartenstein specializes in **hearing aid fitting, custom ear molds** and **personal protector equipment** to help prevent hearing loss and tinnitus.