

Hearing Health Care for Adults: Priorities for Improving Access and Affordability

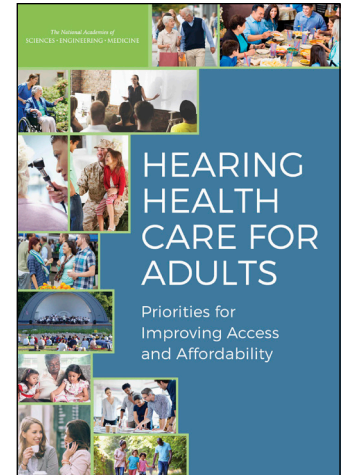
Hearing loss can take many forms: It can be mild or severe, present at birth or begin later in life, occur gradually or suddenly, result from a health condition or accompany aging. It is estimated that 30 million people in the United States have hearing loss, and hearing loss has been identified as the fifth leading cause, globally, of years lived with disability. Furthermore, as the U.S. population of older adults increases, hearing loss will become an area of greater concern.

Hearing is a vital human sense that is important to communication and health and can affect quality of life. Yet for a variety of reasons, many people with hearing loss do not seek out or receive hearing health care. Estimates of hearing aid use are that 67 to 86 percent of people who may benefit from hearing aids do not use them, and many hearing assistive technologies as well as auditory rehabilitation services are not fully utilized. Long seen as an issue for individuals (and to some extent their families and friends), there is a growing recognition that hearing loss is a significant public health concern that can be addressed by actions at multiple levels.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine convened an expert committee to study the affordability and accessibility of hearing health care for adults in the United States. Using a set of guiding principles (see Box 1) to help shape its work, the committee recommends key institutional, technological, and regulatory changes that would enable consumers to find and fully use the appropriate, affordable, and high-quality services, technologies, and support they need. The resulting report, *Hearing Health Care for Adults: Priorities for Improving Access and Affordability*, provides those recommendations. (For a broad overview of the committee’s findings and recommended actions, please see Box 2.)

IMPROVING ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY

Along with hearing aids and other assistive technologies, hearing-related services play an important—and often overlooked—role in hearing health care. Assessment of an individual’s hearing difficulties, diagnosis of any underlying medical conditions, evaluation of a person’s hearing loss and treatment needs, and related counseling and services are central to supporting hearing health. Yet such treatments are often expensive and difficult to access, and many in the general public report dissatisfaction with hearing health care in the United States. Furthermore, hearing health care does not reach many of the underserved populations who need it.



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Given the high incidence of hearing loss in the adult population and the low use of hearing health care, the committee makes a number of recommendations to improve accessibility. These include the removal of barriers to access, such as the regulation that an adult seeking hearing aids be required to first have a medical evaluation by a physician or sign a waiver of that evaluation. People who need hearing health care services and technologies should be at the center of their own care, with the option to make decisions about what is the most appropriate care for them. Mechanisms such as telehealth, retail clinics, and community health workers should be used to increase options for accessing hearing health care. Additionally, public health agencies and health care providers should take into account hearing health in regular medical and wellness visits when there is cause for concern.

BOX 1

PRINCIPLES GUIDING COMMITTEE'S WORK

In examining the complex issues around hearing loss in adults and hearing health care, the committee developed a set of principles that guided its work:

- Prioritize the needs of individuals with hearing loss
- Emphasize hearing as a public health concern with societal responsibilities and effects
- Move toward equity and transparency
- Recognize that hearing loss may require a range of solutions
- Improve outcomes with a focus on value, quality, and safety
- Work toward an integrated approach that provides options

Along with accessibility, cost can also be a key factor in making health care decisions. Currently, nearly all expenses for adult hearing health care must be paid for out-of-pocket. Employer-based coverage for hearing health care tends to be modest at best, and hearing health care that goes beyond a diagnostic hearing test and is not medically treatable is not covered by Medicare Part B. To improve affordability of hearing health care, the committee recommends that payers, such as the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, evaluate options to provide more coverage to their beneficiaries.

HEARING DEVICES AND TECHNOLOGIES

The wide range of types and severity of hearing loss means that a wide range of technologies should be available to meet those diverse needs. These technologies should meet safety requirements, should be tested using real world hearing environments and outcomes measures, and should be compatible with other technologies, including cell phones, televisions, and emergency alert systems.

To expand the range of options available to consumers, the committee recommends that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) create a category of over-the-counter wearable hearing devices, intended for use by adults with mild and moderate hearing loss, that meet specific safety and quality standards. This approach would enable consumers and patients to take more control over their own health conditions. The committee also emphasizes the need for greater transparency through the unbundling of prices for hearing health care services and related technologies and raising awareness of patients' rights of access to their hearing health care information and records.

Improving the accessibility and affordability of hearing health care will require solutions that span society: collaborative and sustained work from stakeholders in the public and private sectors and across professions.

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

One facet of supporting people with hearing loss means working to reduce stigma and ensure that consumers understand their hearing test results. People must have the information they need to compare technologies and to determine pathways to hearing health care services. The committee recommends that stakeholders including

advocacy organizations, government agencies, and hearing health care professional associations improve the evidence-based information available to the public. Such information should speak to adults of all health literacy levels and should address the wide range of services and technologies, as well as their comparative effectiveness and costs.

BOX 2

KEY MESSAGES: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDED ACTIONS*

Findings

- Hearing is vital to communication, health, function, and quality of life. Individuals need to be alert to their hearing health, as hearing loss can range from mild to profound and tends to increase with age, onset can be gradual, and each individual's hearing needs are unique.
- Hearing health care involves a wide range of services and technologies with ever-expanding and evolving options; however, many people do not have access to these options or cannot afford them.
- Hearing loss is a public health and societal concern; engagement and action are needed across the spectrum of relevant stakeholders, including individuals and families, professionals, nonprofit organizations, industries, government, and the health care community.

Recommended actions

- Improve population-based information on hearing loss and hearing health care
- Develop and promote measures to assess and improve quality of hearing health care services
- Remove FDA's regulation for medical evaluation or waiver of that evaluation prior to hearing aid purchase
- Empower consumers and patients in their use of hearing health care
- Improve access to hearing health care for underserved and vulnerable populations
- Promote hearing health care in wellness and medical visits for those with concerns about their hearing
- Implement a new FDA device category for over-the-counter wearable hearing devices
- Improve the compatibility and interoperability of hearing technologies with communications systems and the transparency of hearing aid programming
- Improve affordability of hearing health care by actions across federal, state, and private sectors
- Evaluate and implement innovative models of hearing health care to improve access, quality, and affordability
- Improve publicly available information on hearing health
- Promote individual, employer, private sector, and community-based actions to support and manage hearing health and effective communication

** All findings and recommendations are of equal importance and are not prioritized.*

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Individuals, family members, employers, and communities all can take actions to maximize hearing and communication. People and their families can be aware of hearing and communication difficulties and should seek out information and care, as well as peer-support groups and other supports for those with hearing loss. Employers and communities should promote supportive work and community environments by ensuring compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and by incorporating into built environments the technologies that improve hearing and communication.

CONCLUSION

Hearing loss must be recognized as a public health concern, influenced and affected by decisions and actions at multiple levels. Improving the accessibility and affordability of hearing health care will require solutions that span society: collaborative and sustained work from stakeholders in the public and private sectors and across professions. The committee's recommendations offer a blueprint to guide those collaborative efforts, with the goal of improving hearing and communication abilities for individuals and across the population.◆◆◆

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