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Hearing Aids: Fact or False Advertising

By Amanda Kuehn



Hearing aids iStock photo

"Testing ... 1, 2, 3 ... Can you hear me?"

For many Americans the answer is "no." According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 17 percent of Americans report some degree of hearing loss. That percentage increases with age, reaching 47 percent for adults 75 years or older. Hearing loss is a fairly normal part of aging. Paying \$9,000 for a hearing aid is not.

"Some hearing aid dispensers prey on senior citizens," said Maureen Neumann, program coordinator for Lafayette Senior Services. "People are surprised when they're told what the price range is they should actually expect to pay." In an effort to combat the shadier side of this industry, LSS organized "Hearing Aids Fact vs. False Advertising," a presentation that was held last Thursday, Sept. 19. The presentation was led by Valerie and Gregory Fitzgibbons, audiologists from Diablo Valley Ear, Nose & Throat.

During the presentation, the Fitzgibbons educated 30 audience members on the anatomy of hearing loss and the tools and tactics that can help them combat it. "We cannot restore your hearing back to normal," said Valerie Fitzgibbons. "A hearing aid is an assistive device. [It] is going to help you hear, but you and your family need to work with it."

The Fitzgibbons recommended several specialists in the area, noting that, "When you're working with a hearing aid, you need to be able to go back conveniently for multiple follow-ups."

"We want you to find somebody good," Valerie Fitzgibbons said. "Even if that isn't us."

In the second half of the presentation, Gregory Fitzgibbons shed some light on common scams and tactics in the hearing industry. "There are good dispensers and bad

dispensers," he said. "There are good audiologists and bad audiologists."

You should never purchase a hearing aid without a hearing test. Hearing loss, much like eyesight, varies from person to person and a hearing aid should be custom-tuned to your needs. "A consultation should be extensive and educational," added Valerie Fitzgibbons. "You should never feel a push [to purchase]."

"If an ad looks too good to be true, it probably is," Gregory Fitzgibbons said. He warned to be wary of extremely low prices, trade-ins, celebrity spokespersons, the MSRP (manufacturer's suggested retail price) and ads that show asterisks or mention re-stocking fees for returns. Under the California Song-Beverly Consumer Warranty Act, all hearing aids should be returnable for a full refund within 30 days of purchase.

According to the Fitzgibbons, a single entry-level hearing aid should cost around \$1,000. A high-end aid should be no more than \$3,200.

Your needs will depend on your hearing loss and lifestyle. "Most people fall somewhere in the middle," Valerie Fitzgibbons said.

The earlier that hearing loss is detected the easier it is to make adjustments. Hearing screenings performed by audiologists from Hearing Science of Walnut Creek and Diablo Valley Ear, Nose and Throat are offered monthly through Lafayette Senior Services. The 20-minute diagnostic screenings, which cost \$1 for members and \$3 for non-members, take place on the first Wednesday of the month from 1 to 2 p.m. in the Alder Room at 500 St. Mary's Road. You can schedule your appointment by calling (925) 284-5050.

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[back](#)

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