

7 Tips to Maintain Hearing Health Care Amid COVID-19

By Shari Eberts

The world has changed a lot in the past few weeks. Physical distancing due to COVID-19 has closed restaurants, theaters, and many other “non-essential” businesses, prioritizing health care and access to food and medicines above all else. This has caused many of us to self-isolate, keeping our distance for our safety and that of others, to help flatten the curve of infections. For people with hearing loss, maintaining our hearing health and having access to working hearing aids and other communication devices are critical as we adapt to various ongoing—and often stressful—changes. Despite this challenging time, stay on top of your hearing health with these tips:

1. Take an inventory. Make sure you have plenty of hearing batteries on hand to keep your devices functioning for at least eight weeks. Replenish supplies online or ask your local pharmacy or supermarket to deliver some to your home. Many pharmacies are offering free delivery for prescription items; they may do the same for hearing aid batteries. Your audiologist may also have extras on hand they can send to you. Check out a subscription battery service for home delivery such as HearOClub.

2. Explore telehealth options. Call your audiologist about teleaudiology options, which are remote hearing care services using video conferencing technology in place of an in-person visit. Video calls are preferable to audio-only calls because they allow for lipreading. Skype, a free video calling service, provides live captions for all calls (captioning directions here: <https://bit.ly/2UbkmTA>). While the captioning quality can vary, it will help fill in some of the gaps you may miss. Call your insurance provider about your telehealth coverage, since Medicare, for example, has recently expanded its coverage for telehealth to help seniors during this public health emergency.


3. Utilize curbside, contact-less services if available. Check for drop-off and curbside services that your audiologists may be offering. If available, observe CDC guidance on physical distancing by staying in your car while the audiologist or a team member comes to pick up your device. If the repair is quick, wait in your car until the device is returned to you. For larger repairs, schedule a time for curbside pick-up of the repair at a later date. Don't hesitate to ask the audiology clinic about their infection control strategies to make sure that devices are returned clean and ready for your use.

4. Stay as connected as possible. Speak to someone by phone or video chat each day or two to stay connected to friends and family. Speaking on the phone can be challenging for people with hearing loss, but many captioned phone options exist. Explore this list compiled by the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA): <https://bit.ly/3bk3MNJ>.

5. Experiment with a variety of communication tools. With more conversations moving to phone and video calls, and in-person chats taking place behind medical masks, you may need to use additional tools for communication. Try a speech-to-text app like Live Transcribe (only on Android), Otter, or Ava to create captions on demand. Other options like a Boogie Board or a small whiteboard work well for short messages. Paper and pen are also a good option.

6. Consider a backup hearing device. Should your hearing aids stop working, and you are unable to have them repaired, try a smartphone amplifier such as Ear Machine. This and similar apps allow you to use your smartphone and a pair of headphones to amplify sound in real-time. Consider an over-the-counter personal sound amplifier product (PSAP) or a pocket talker. These are not hearing aids but might be able to get you through a crisis. These options will work best for those with mild to moderate hearing loss and need a little hearing enhancement in specific situations.

7. Prepare a communication kit. If you need to seek additional medical attention, call ahead first. If you are told to visit the doctor, bring your hearing aids, extra batteries, chargers and any additional communication devices you have discovered from your experimentation activities. Create signs for you to wear or be displayed in your hospital room to remind medical personnel about your hearing loss. If safe to do so, bring a friend or loved one to assist. If you are hospitalized or for any medical visits, review HLAA's Guide for Effective Communication in Health Care (<https://bit.ly/3bmgKdM>)

The COVID-19 pandemic is making life more challenging for everyone. Prioritize your hearing health by staying in touch with your audiologist and/or other hearing health care professionals. With flexibility, creativity, and willingness to try new communication technology, we can protect our health without neglecting our hearing. 



Ms. Eberts is a hearing health advocate, writer, and avid Bikram yogi. She is the founder of Living With Hearing Loss, a blog and online community for people living with hearing loss and tinnitus. She also serves on the Board of Trustees of the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA). She has adult-onset genetic hearing loss, and hopes that by sharing her story she will help others live more peacefully with their own hearing issues.



The Hearing Journal is proud to announce a partnership with the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) to provide patient handouts. For information on HLAA activities and events, visit <https://www.hearingloss.org/>.