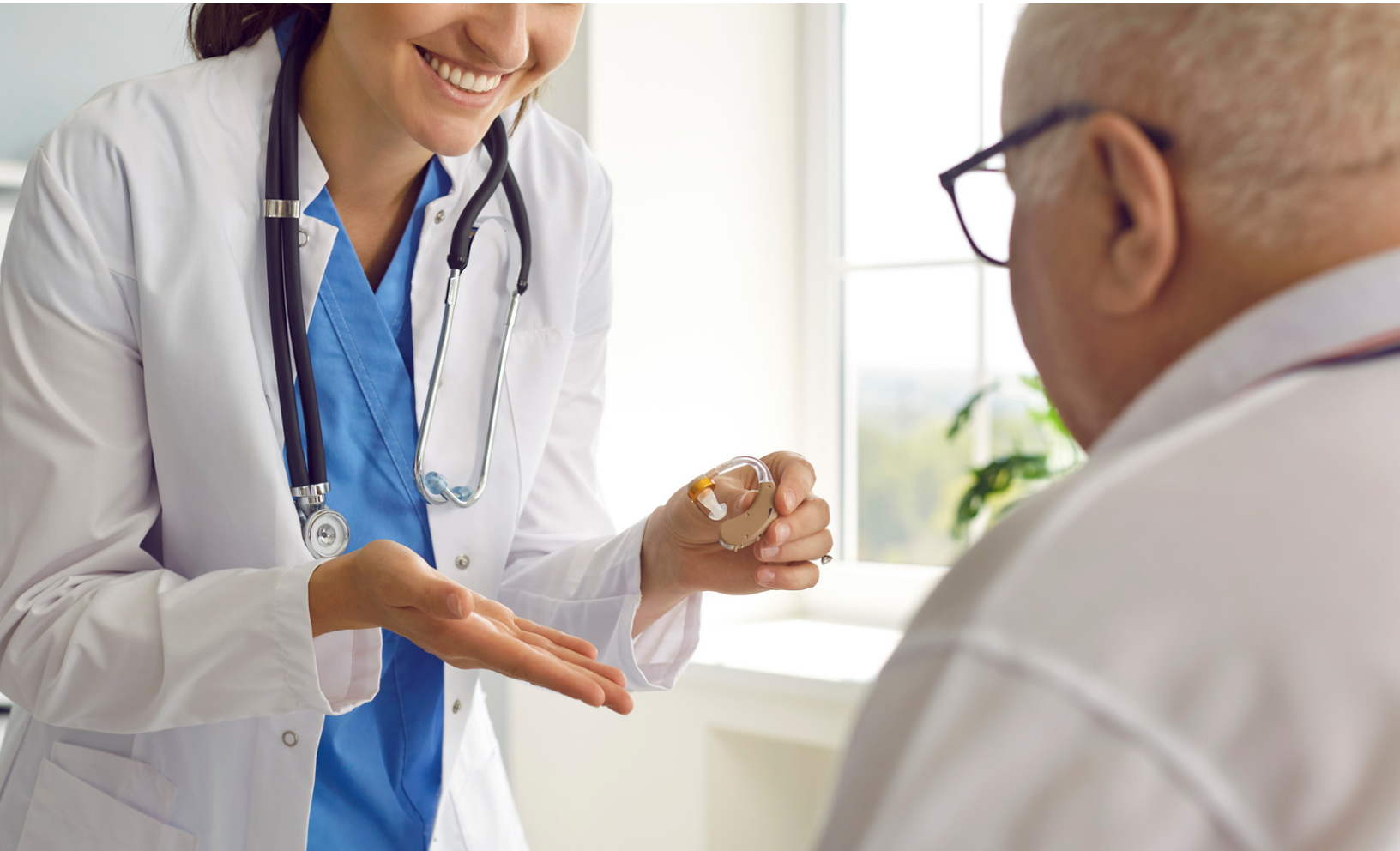




Canadian Hard of Hearing Association
British Columbia Chapter



ACCESS TO HEARING AIDS

CHHA BC POSITION PAPER

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FORWARD

The Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, British Columbia Chapter is a consumer-based, non-profit, and self-help organization. Formed in 1986, it is part of a national network and includes local branches in the Province of British Columbia. CHHA-BC represents the interests of people with hearing loss and is engaged in awareness-raising, educational and advocacy activities.

This publication is part of CHHA's educational and advocacy activities. Our thanks to lead author, Gael Hannan, and to the members of the Board of CHHA for this paper outlining the importance of access to hearing aids.

CHHA BC has posted this paper on its website of www.chha-bc.org, and will update it online as changes and new developments occur. This printed version was completed in December 2023.

On behalf of the Board of CHHA BC,

Ruth Warick

President, CHHA-BC

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INTRODUCTION

Hearing loss is a medical condition with significant social consequences that has a profound impact on the lives of people who communicate through listening and spoken language.

Good communication – the glue that connects people to each other and our environment – is critical to physical, emotional and mental health. Hearing loss in children affects listening and spoken language development, social and emotional development, and academic success. For adults, acquired hearing loss affects their ability to communicate, which in turn can profoundly interfere with relationships, working and leisure lives, and access to health care.

Health Canada reports that 8% of children up to age 19, and 60% of adults have some degree of hearing loss, with the incidence rising dramatically after the age of 70. Losses range from mild to profound, but even a mild hearing loss can have a negative impact. Unaddressed hearing loss, regardless of severity, has been shown to have harmful repercussions on mental health, our sense of self-worth, and has related health implications such as cardiovascular, diabetes and cognitive decline.

Hearing aids, for most people living with hearing loss, are proven to be a crucial and beneficial step to accessing hearing health. However, studies show that actual hearing aid uptake represents a small fraction of those people who would benefit from them. There are many reasons for this, including high cost and their perceived benefit.

CHHA BC POSITION

We believe that all persons with hearing loss should have access to an environment free from stigma, discrimination, and obstacles to their full participation in society.

We promote the development of, and the accessibility to, technical aids and other services and facilities for people with hearing loss.

For a healthy, thriving population that includes hearing health, we believe that British Columbians living with hearing loss should have access to hearing technology, regardless of their ability to pay.

We believe in responsible advertising by hearing aid retailers. Some campaigns appear to offer a special offer of benefits that are actually standard, such as a minimum of a free 30-90 day trial period.

THE BENEFITS OF HEARING HEALTH CARE AND HEARING AIDS

Hearing aids have been proven to be a crucial accessibility tool that improves comprehension and communication for people living with hearing loss, subsequently improving their overall quality of life. Even though the number of people living with hearing loss in Canada is growing, rising from 40% of adults in 2015 to 60% in 2021, people who suspect a hearing loss typically wait an average of four years before seeking help from hearing health care professionals. This is due partly to the stigma of hearing loss, the perceived lack of benefit, the belief that it's a part of the normal ageing process, and the actual cost. British Columbians should be encouraged to have their hearing assessed to establish baseline hearing levels and to identify if hearing devices are necessary.

SOURCES OF HEARING AIDS IN BC

The traditional channel for buying hearing aids is through registered audiologists or hearing instrument practitioners. CHHA-BC supports this method which involves the professional assessments that are not available from lower-cost hearing devices purchased online and which may pose a damage risk to the user's

residual hearing. In addition, online “hearing tests” are basic and do not capture a complete audiological assessment, which ensures that no medical intervention is necessary beyond hearing aids.

At this time, over-the-counter hearing devices, recently approved by the American FDA are not available in Canada.

COST OF HEARING AIDS

Quality hearing aids, which are sophisticated medical devices, are not cheap. The average cost of a hearing aid in British Columbia is in the \$2000-8000 range, rising in models that offer additional bells and whistles. Concerns exist that people are often prescribed more expensive hearing aids when entry or mid-level hearing aids would be more appropriate and less costly.

The average life of devices is 4-6 years. In an era of financial instability, this cost makes the hearing aid a luxury item for many people.

CURRENT SOURCES OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

The government of British Columbia provides limited and insufficient funding for assistive hearing technology. Where coverage is not provided, citizens with hearing loss must cover the costs out-of-pocket or obtain grants from outside sources.

CHHA BC has documented the sources of funding for hearing aids and cochlear implants in BC, on its website. Currently, major gaps in available funding exist for those who fall into certain categories: 1) families with children over the age of 5, who do not qualify for the Healthy Kids Program; 2) students; funding is available for remote microphones systems and other accessibility measures, but not for hearing aids; 3) seniors who are retired and not receiving income assistance and/or are not affiliated with non-insured health benefits for First Nations and Inuit, Veterans Affairs Canada, or WorkSafe BC.

CHHA-BC ADVOCACY FOR BETTER HEARING HEALTH

In our call for better hearing health through funding of assistive hearing technology for British Columbians with hearing loss, CHHA BC participates in:

- the *Help BC Hear Better Group*, a team of healthcare professionals, researchers, and people with hearing loss who want improved access to hearing health care in British Columbia, including more affordable hearing aids.
- the Hearing Health Alliance of Canada which promotes better awareness of hearing loss and calls on the government of Canada to adopt a *National Hearing Health Strategy*.
- the Breaking the Barriers project of Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility and the University of British Columbia, which aims to make primary physicians more involved in hearing healthcare of their patients.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The World Health Organization's 2021 World Hearing Report called on Ministries of Health to do the following:

- Ensure equitable access to ear and hearing care services for all, including those living in remote areas or belonging to vulnerable groups.
- Provide financial risk protection and reduce out-of-pocket expenses for ear and hearing care.
- Involve other government sectors and civil society, including organizations for people who are deaf and hard of hearing in the planning and implementation process, to foster a holistic, collaborative approach.

CHHA BC agrees with these recommendations, as they would result not only in improved hearing health of British Columbians, but in their overall health, through better communication and quality of life. We recommend:

- Provincial government financial support of required assistive listening devices such as hearing aids.
- An awareness campaign on the importance of hearing health.

- An end to misleading sales tactics by hearing aid retailers whereby consumers are led to believe that they are taking part in special hearing aid studies.

REFERENCES

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- [Help BC Hear Better](#)
- [CHHA-bc.org](#)
- [MarkeTrak 2022: Navigating the Changing Landscape of Hearing Healthcare](#)
- [World Report on Hearing, 2021](#), World Health Organization



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<https://www.chha-bc.org/>