

# Hearing Your Best

Spring 2016 • Vol. 16, Issue 1



INFORMATION FROM

Associated Audiologists, Inc. "Hearing Your Best for Life"



## vHIT Technology Pinpoints Dizziness and Balance Disorders

According to the National Institutes of Health, each year more than 1.6 million older Americans go to emergency rooms for fall-related injuries. Often, these falls are caused by dizziness and balance disorders, a problem up to 80 percent of people 65 and older have experienced.

To accurately diagnose and treat dizziness and balance disorders, Associated Audiologists is now the only private practice in the Kansas City area using the latest technology available called the video head impulse test (vHIT).

"Though we have had ways to test for dizziness and balance disorders, we never have been able to examine each of the six semi-circular canals in the inner ear," explains Sam Bittel, Au.D., FAAA, Vestibular Program Director for Associated Audiologists.



Dr. Sam Bittel

"When combined with other testing we have available, vHIT can help us look at every sensory organ in the ear to more accurately diagnose and treat dizziness and balance disorders.

"This is groundbreaking technology that helps us look at each individual component of the inner ear and how well it is functioning," Dr. Bittel says. "vHIT opens the door to diagnose and treat patients who previously may have been told they do not have a vestibular problem, but who have continued to experience dizziness and balance symptoms."

In patients with blurred vision with head movement, vertigo, dizziness, and/or disequilibrium, vHIT can be an efficient tool to pinpoint the problem, which ultimately helps avoid expensive and unnecessary testing.

At Associated Audiologists, vHIT is administered and interpreted by an audiologist with a doctoral degree and at least two years of additional training administering and interpreting this and other tests for dizziness and balance disorders.

"This technology has exciting possibilities for our patients with dizziness and balance issues," Dr. Bittel adds. "We also are using vHIT to identify patients who may have experienced concussion, stroke or head trauma."

**For more information about vHIT, or to schedule a comprehensive evaluation with a vestibular audiologist near you, call our main clinic, 913-498-2827.**



**vHIT is a non-invasive test** that involves the patient wearing small video goggles. The audiologist moves the patient's head, stimulating each of their six semi-circular canals. The goggles measure the patient's discreet eye movements, which are recorded in a computer-based diagnostic system. Results tell the audiologist how well the semi-circular canals are working, which can be critical to balance control.

# Hearing Your Best



## Hear Here...

*By Tim Steele, Ph.D., FAAA, President, Associated Audiologists, Inc.*

Many of us, including the staff at Associated Audiologists Inc., are just beginning to use our new 2016 health insurance plans. As an individual, a father of four, an audiologist, and a business owner, I am finding that health insurance is becoming more challenging to understand and navigate.

It's important to remember that health insurance carriers are for-profit companies. This can influence their decisions as they compete to recruit and retain members. With the large number of baby boomers, hearing care services and hearing aids are a new area of focus. As a company that delivers healthcare services and regularly deals with health insurance companies, it has become imperative to have in-depth knowledge of our health insurance contracts and how the details can affect our patients with hearing loss, tinnitus, dizziness/vertigo and balance disorders.

We have three full-time staff members that spend most of their days assisting our audiologists and patients, helping them better understand the differences between carriers and their individual plans.

A new trend for health insurance companies is to provide hearing aids through exclusive third-party distribution organizations. In some cases, companies such as United Health Care own subsidiary companies that directly sell hearing aids.

This was recently under scrutiny by the Kansas Attorney General. In many cases, our patients are being told that in order to use a hearing aid benefit, they must go through a specific organization to secure hearing aids, which is not necessarily true. In other cases, they are being told that their insurance provides a hearing aid benefit—instead they are simply distributing an inexpensive, low-quality hearing device. To help you truly understand the pros and cons of the specific benefits of your health insurance plan as it relates to audiology or hearing aids, please contact your audiologist.

Since January, I have spoken with several patients about their 2016 benefits. This has helped clear up many misconceptions. One long-standing patient of mine called his insurance company to learn more about his insurance, and the customer service representative actually referred him to a hearing aid dispenser, not an audiologist. We determined that he was able to remain our patient with the same benefit he's always had.

Another patient was informed she had a hearing aid benefit, only to learn that it provides a low-end device which is less advanced than the five-year-old hearing aid she currently uses. Yet another patient has been required to go through a third-party distributor that has limited technology available, and which provides hearing aids at a higher cost than if she were to purchase them privately from us.

In summary, our staff is highly educated and well-informed about navigating your health insurance plan when it comes to audiology and hearing aid benefits. Please call us before speaking with a customer service agent about your hearing aid benefits. We have seen many times when the representative answering the phone is not familiar with audiology and hearing aids, and is unaware of the specific contract details with Associated Audiologists.

We are here for you and that includes helping each patient learn about their specific coverage. This is consistent with our mission to "change lives through comprehensive audiology care," especially as health insurance has become such an important part of our daily expenses. If you have any questions about your insurance coverage or a "hearing aid benefit," don't hesitate to call or visit with us about your options at your upcoming check-up.

## Same Web Address, New Look and Functions!

Recently, we launched an updated website at the same familiar address, [www.hearingyourbest.com](http://www.hearingyourbest.com).

The site is full of educational information about hearing loss and Associated Audiologists, including free e-books and opportunities to ask our audiologists your questions.





# Will my insurance cover the cost of hearing aids?

Insurance coverage for hearing aids is a complex topic best addressed individually, but here are five tips to keep in mind when considering your coverage:

**1** Nearly all insurance companies provide some coverage for a diagnostic hearing evaluation. This includes the testing necessary to determine if you have a hearing loss, as well as the type and degree of hearing loss. Some insurances require physician orders or pre-certification for testing or procedures. The audiologist uses test information to make recommendations including the hearing aid technology best suited to your lifestyle, needs and budget.

**2** Insurance coverage for hearing aids varies greatly from one insurance provider to the next, and even within the same provider's range of plans. For example, just because you have a particular type of insurance, does not mean that coverage is the same across the board. The plans vary within the companies. One type of plan may pay for hearing aids, while another may not. So, even though you and your neighbor may both have insurance with the same company, you may have different plans that provide different coverage for hearing aids.

**3** To further complicate matters, some insurance companies promote what is called a "hearing aid benefit," which may actually be purchased through a third party. Be sure to check this very closely. Often, the benefit is only if you purchase a specific device from a specific provider or manufacturer. Depending on the type of hearing loss you have, this may be fine. But, many times, these are lower cost, low-end devices that may not work well for your specific hearing needs. Remember, it's only a benefit if it helps you hear better.

**4** Even if your insurance company covers hearing aids, you need to meet your deductible before coverage kicks in. If you have a

high deductible, say \$5,000, you'll have to meet that before your hearing aids are covered. Once that is met, many companies will cover a percentage of the hearing aid cost, often 70 to 80 percent.

**5** Currently, there is no tax credit for the purchase of hearing aids, though Associated Audiologists has been involved in lobbying Congress for passage of a tax credit. In the meantime, hearing aids do qualify as a medical expense if you itemize your medical expenses on your income taxes. And, many people use their flexible medical savings plan through work to save the money to pay for their hearing aids. We also offer payment options via CareCredit.

Bottom line, more and more insurance companies are promoting hearing aid benefits, but coverage varies widely depending on the company and plan. Our staff has the expertise to check and verify your coverage, as well as provide detailed estimates of our hearing aid recommendations and costs.



Recently, patients with Federal Blue Cross/ Blue Shield, GEHA and other insurance plans have received mailings about TruHearing. Upon investigation, our staff has learned you **DO NOT** have to go through TruHearing for your hearing care and can remain an Associated Audiologists patient with the same benefits.

*Please call if you have questions.*

**Please feel free to contact us to verify your coverage, or if you have any other questions about if/how your insurance plan pays for hearing aids.**



# Hearing Your Best

## PATIENT TESTIMONIAL

Jimm and Raquel Gray...

## Better Together!

After 42 years of marriage, Jimm and Raquel Gray know the importance of good communication. So when Raquel noticed she was straining to hear conversations and the TV a few years ago, she did something about it.

“I went to see another provider and purchased hearing aids, but they didn’t perform as well as I thought they should,” she admits. “I kept seeing ads for Associated Audiologists, so I decided to give them a call.”

After scheduling a consultation with Stacey Baldwin, Au.D., FAAA, Senior Audiologist and Clinical Systems Manager, Raquel knew she had come to the right place. “The testing Dr. Baldwin performed was much more in depth, and it was obvious that the quality of the hearing aids she had to offer were much better than the ones I had purchased. The difference was like night and day!”

Jimm, who accompanied his wife to her appointments, had a different but equally concerning problem with his hearing. “I spent my career in the Navy around weapons and planes,”

he says. “In 1988, I started having problems with tinnitus.”

To cope with the constant ringing and sound sensitivity, he wore ear plugs 80 percent of the time. “Every sound bothered Jimm,” Raquel says. “Dogs barking, dishes clinking together, large family gatherings and loud restaurants—they were all nerve-wracking.”

When Jimm shared his story with Dr. Baldwin, she encouraged him to see her colleague, Laura Flowers, Au.D., FAAA, Tinnitus and Sound Sensitivity Manager. “We went to a seminar featuring Dr. Flowers, and I decided to schedule an appointment with her,” Jimm says.

During his assessment, Dr. Flowers explained that in addition to suffering from tinnitus, by wearing earplugs so often, Jimm had become hypersensitive to sound.

“The tinnitus was disruptive to my life,” Jimm says. “Wearing the ear plugs

helped at first, but eventually, they created another problem.”

After talking with Dr. Flowers, Jimm began wearing his ear plugs less and less, and received a pair of hearing aids with tinnitus maskers through the Veterans Administration with Dr. Flowers’ recommendation. “Dr. Flowers told me the hearing aids would help me control my tinnitus, instead of my tinnitus controlling me, and she was right.”

Now the Overland Park couple is enjoying conversations, family get-togethers and dining out again. “Associated Audiologists is awesome!” Raquel says. “From the front desk staff to our audiologists, everyone treats us like family.”

“But they also are thorough and professional,” Jimm adds. “On a scale of 1 to 10, Associated Audiologists is a 15. Dr. Baldwin and Dr. Flowers have improved our lives 100 percent!”



## Better Hearing and Speech Month

Each May, Better Hearing & Speech Month (BHSM) provides an opportunity to raise awareness about communication disorders and the role of audiologists in providing life-altering treatment.

For more information, visit [asha.org](http://asha.org).

Communication  
Takes  
**Care**  
BETTER HEARING  
& SPEECH MONTH



Find us on facebook.  
[www.facebook.com/hearingyourbest](http://www.facebook.com/hearingyourbest)



# Some Medications May Affect Your Hearing

According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), there are more than 200 known medications that can cause or contribute to hearing loss, tinnitus and/or dizziness/imbalance. Some of these are prescription medicines, and some are over-the-counter.

**T**hat is why a comprehensive medical history, including an inventory of all the medicines you are taking, is an important part of your hearing evaluation at Associated Audiologists. "If we know the medical conditions you are facing and the medications you are taking, we can better understand the potential risks to your hearing," explains Tim Steele, Ph.D., FAAA, President, Associated Audiologists. You'll notice that we'll be regularly documenting and updating your medications, which is now a quality initiative from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

"In some cases, it may not be possible for your physician to prescribe a different medication," Dr. Steele says. "But, we can consult with the patient and physician to monitor the patient's hearing loss and develop a plan for treatment to reduce the impact."

## Medicines that Can Cause Hearing Loss

► **Chemotherapy** – Many medications can cause ototoxicity, but one of the most ototoxic drugs in use today is

the chemotherapy drug cisplatin. This drug is often used to treat cancer, but can cause hearing loss after just one dose. If you are undergoing treatment for cancer with chemotherapy, talk with your physician about whether there are risks to your hearing.

► **Antibiotics** – While some antibiotics have been documented to cause hearing loss, these medications aren't typically ototoxic unless delivered intravenously (for certain conditions).

► **Loop Diuretics** – These medicines, which can include Bumex, Lasix and Edecrin, can cause hearing loss when given intravenously for acute kidney failure, acute hypertensive crisis, or acute pulmonary edema/ congestive heart failure.

► **Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)** – These medicines include aspirin, ibuprofen and naproxen. Higher doses have been documented to cause hearing loss, which is almost always reversible once the medication is discontinued.

► **Quinine** – These medicines include Aralen, Atabrine and Quinam, and have similar side effects to aspirin. Hearing loss is usually reversible once the patient stops taking the medicine.

**If you are taking any of these medicines, be sure to tell your audiologist so that we can monitor the potential impact on your hearing. Do not stop the use of any medication without first consulting your physician.**





## STAFF NEWS

### Dr. Bittel Publishes Research and Presents at AAA

**Sam Bittel, Au.D., FAAA**, Vestibular Program Director, recently published an article on Positional Nystagmus (a condition of involuntary eye movement) in Patients Evaluated for Dizziness and Imbalance in the journal *Advances in Otolaryngology*. Using a retrospective chart review, results indicated positional nystagmus is present in 10.5 to 21 percent of patients evaluated for dizziness and imbalance disorders.



Dr. Bittel and four colleagues also recently presented a session at the American Academy of Audiology meeting in Phoenix, Ariz., April 13-16 on the clinical and business strategies essential to the successful development and implementation of a balance practice.

### Extern Graduates

**David Paul** is graduating from the University of Kansas Medical Center in May with his doctorate in audiology. He has spent the past year with Associated Audiologists, performing an externship, gaining experience in hearing aid technology and fitting, tinnitus diagnosis and management and vestibular evaluation and treatment.



David is a military veteran who became interested in audiology while deployed overseas. After returning to the states, he applied and was accepted to the program at the University of Kansas Medical Center. He is originally from Emporia, Kan., and earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kan. Please join us in congratulating him on this accomplishment.

### Happy Anniversary!

Congratulations to **Marlene**, who has been with Associated Audiologists, Inc., for 10 years and who leads our administrative staff at our Overland Park clinic. We are grateful for everything Marlene does for our patients and our staff!



### Congratulations Dr. Jacobson!

**Dana Jacobson, Au.D., FAAA**, Overland Park Clinic Manager and Senior Audiologist, and her husband, Jon Davis, recently welcomed a healthy baby boy into their family Feb. 22, 2016.



### Welcome!

Please join us in welcoming the newest member of the Associated Audiologists administrative team, **Jenny**. She is serving as the full-time administrative assistant for the Vestibular Program. Jenny comes to us with more than 25 years of experience in the corporate sector.



"The staff at Associated Audiologists is wonderful to work with," Jenny says. "I have so much respect for the work they do and the people whose lives are changed by the Vestibular Program."

### New Externs Join Practice



Jake Nuffer



Katherine Bergman



Sarah Schotte

Three new externs will be working with Associated Audiologists in the final year of their educational study for the doctorate of audiology degree. They are:

**Jake Nuffer**, Missouri State University, will work in the practice's Kansas City area clinics.

**Katherine Bergman**, Washington University, also will work in the practice's Kansas City area clinics.

**Sarah Schotte**, Wichita State University, will work in the Manhattan Clinic, as well as some of the Kansas City area clinics.

All three externs anticipate graduating in May 2017.

### Drs. Baldwin and Pacey Co-Chair Statewide Meeting

**Stacey Baldwin, Au.D., FAAA**, Senior Audiologist and Clinical Systems Manager, and **Lindsey Pacey, Au.D., FAAA**, Audiologist with our Leavenworth Clinic, are co-chairing the audiology program for the Kansas Speech-Language-Hearing Association conference this fall. The meeting is an opportunity for audiologists from across the state to come together to learn more about best practices in audiology.



Dr. Baldwin



Dr. Pacey

# How to Get the Hearing Aid Technology You Need

**D**igital technology and the microchip have made it possible to pack more power and features into the latest hearing aids. But is more better for you?

According to Lisa Battani, Au.D., FAAA, Hearing Aid Program Director, finding the best hearing aid isn't as simple as just buying the latest technology.

"Most hearing aid manufacturers offer directional microphones, feedback cancelling and noise reduction systems, all available in a variety of hearing aid styles," Dr. Battani says.

"Today, the benefits and sound experience for the hearing aid user are not about the presence or absence of a specific feature. They're about the technology used, what the specific features can do for the patient, how the patient performs with that technology, and most importantly how that technology is programmed and verified."

**For more information about how to get the hearing technology you need, talk with your audiologist.**

**To help you find the best technology for your individual circumstances, Dr. Battani offers these tips:**

- ▶ **Think about your listening goals.** Do you want to hear better in noisy environments, like restaurants or groups of people? Talk on the cell phone? Or hear the sounds of your grandchildren's voices? Your goals help determine which technology could work best for you.
- ▶ **Use a hearing aid that provides good sound quality** across a wide range of listening situations.
- ▶ **Comfort is key** to finding the best hearing aid for you. If it's not comfortable, you probably won't wear it. Consult to find a style that fits well and technology that offers comfortable sound quality.
- ▶ **Have realistic expectations.** Though nothing can replace your natural hearing, the most successful patients faithfully wear their hearing aids every day.
- ▶ **Hearing aids are exposed to humidity and earwax daily.** Consult with your audiologist who can recommend a model with a proven track record of durability that is best for your individual needs.
- ▶ **Schedule follow-up and service.** Hearing aids often require several visits for adjustments, and follow-up appointments at regular intervals to be sure they are performing optimally.
- ▶ **Work with a doctoral-level audiologist** who is an expert in hearing aid technology, and who offers hearing aids from a wide range of manufacturers. The audiologist should consider your lifestyle, health and budget when making recommendations. In addition, verifying the hearing aid's performance relative to your hearing loss and established standards are crucial for your success.



Hearing Your Best is published regularly by Associated Audiologists, Inc. All materials are created by our audiologists solely for the education of our patients and referring physicians. Any reproduction must be approved in writing by our editor. © 2016 by Associated Audiologists, Inc. If you have comments or suggestions, please direct them to:

Editor: Tim Steele, Ph.D., FAAA

Contributors: David Nissen, Stacey Baldwin, Laura Flowers, Sam Bittel, Dana Jacobson, Sam Gillespie, Susan Smittkamp, Linda Erickson, Sarah Jo Mediavilla, Travis Hopkins Williams, Lisa Battani, Lainey Lake, Lindsey Pacey and Danielle Dorner, all Fellows of the American Academy of Audiology.

**Northland**  
8350 N. St. Clair Ave.,  
Suite 175  
Kansas City, MO  
64151  
816-442-7831

**Overland Park**  
12541 Foster St.,  
Suite 220  
Overland Park, KS  
66213  
913-498-2827

**Prairie Village**  
7301 Mission Rd.,  
Suite 140  
Prairie Village, KS  
66208  
913-262-5855

**Shawnee Mission**  
8800 W. 75th St.,  
Suite 101  
Shawnee Mission, KS  
66204  
913-403-0018

**Leavenworth**  
1001 Sixth Ave.,  
Suite 105  
Leavenworth, KS  
66048  
913-682-1870

**Manhattan**  
1133 College Ave.,  
Building A, Suite 101A  
Manhattan, KS  
66502  
785-539-7361

If you no longer wish to receive our newsletter, please e-mail [lisa@hearingyourbest.com](mailto:lisa@hearingyourbest.com).



**Hearing Your Best for Life**

hearingyourbest.com

P.O. BOX 19087

Lenexa, KS 66285

Return Service Requested

PRSRT STD  
U.S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
PERMIT NO. 6412  
Kansas City, MO

Important  
information  
about hearing  
and balance  
health from your  
audiologist.

## Hearing Your Best



### CLINIC CORNER

A common problem our audiologists see in our clinics is itching ears.

This can be caused by a number of issues including dry skin, ear wax or infections. It is important to have your ears examined routinely to determine the appropriate treatment options. In some cases a medical consultation is warranted.

Often, using cotton swabs to clean your ears can make the problem worse by disturbing the natural balance of the delicate skin in the ear canal. And, as you age, poor circulation, diet, illness, medications and other factors can make the skin in your ears itch.

If your condition appears benign, your audiologist may recommend ProEar by Miracell. These natural drops contain plant extracts that provide fast relief for irritated, itching ears, while providing the nutrients the ear needs to restore and maintain healthy tissue. These nutrients are quickly absorbed into the ear tissue.

Associated Audiologists carries Miracell at our clinics, so if you are having problems with itching ears, talk with your audiologist.

