How It Works
What’s inside a typical behind-the-ear hearing aid

MICROPHONE
- picks up sound waves traveling toward your ear

AMPLIFIER
- boosts certain frequencies of sound

COMPUTER CHIP
- converts the analog sounds into digital signals, and compresses and processes those sounds based on your personal hearing needs and environment. The chip also reduces unwanted background noise and cancels feedback.

SPAKER
- transmits the amplified sound into the ear

WHAT CAN YOU HEAR?

Sounds are a combination of loudness (decibels) and frequency, which is the pitch (hertz). Common hearing loss from aging can limit our ability to hear quiet sounds and also often those at high frequencies, even at louder volumes. Human speech is across a range of frequencies. We often lose the ability to hear consonants first, as they tend to register at a higher frequency.

◆ AARP CAN HELP. Visit AARP's Hearing Center at aarp.org/hearing. You’ll find more information about hearing aids, hearing conditions and hearing-loss prevention. Plus, you can take the National Hearing Test, which is free for AARP members.

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WHY OUR HEARING DECLINES

► Age-related hearing loss (known as presbycusis) results largely from damage to hair cells in the inner ear. Presbycusis affects our ability to hear high-frequency sounds, including consonants in speech, says Sarah Sydowski, the audiology director of the Hearing Implant Program at the Cleveland Clinic.

► Age isn't the only cause. Conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes have been linked with hearing loss. It can also be hereditary. And smokers were 60 percent more likely to suffer high-frequency hearing loss than nonsmokers, according to a Japanese study published in March 2018.

► High-volume workplace sounds can take a toll. Hearing issues are the most common service-related disability for U.S. military veterans, according to the HLAA. But even occasional exposure to noise—whether it's a Who concert or your leaf blower—can cause long-term damage. For noises in the 85- to 90-decibel range, such as a lawn mower, you should wear earplugs, says Jackie Clark, immediate past president of the American Academy of Audiology (AAA). Add S. Sydowski: “Those experiences are impacting your hearing system. It adds up.”

► Get a hearing test. Besides checking your eardrums, ear canals and cochlea, an audiologist will interview you to gauge the extent of your hearing loss. “I always ask people if they can hear leaves rustling on a suburban street at midnight when there’s no traffic,” Clark says. “That’s a line of demarcation of normal hearing.”

► Hearing loss can also lead to depression, anxiety and poor relationships, the AAA reports, and it can increase your risk of dementia. When people in their 50s and 60s with hearing loss began using hearing aids, their scores improved in tests measuring working memory and processing speed, according to a study at the University of Texas at El Paso.