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MARTINSVILLE

While the ability to purchase hearing aids and test hearing loss online might seem like an advantage to consumers, local physicians worry the convenience might come at a larger, more permanent cost.

Jane Bowman, president of the Indiana Hearing Aid Alliance, said consumers have been led to believe hearing testing online and purchasing hearing aids from a website is a less expensive alternative to making an appointment at a hearing center.

"There are so many things that you have to be able to do physically to inspect in a person's ear. How can you do that over the Internet? You can't," Bowman said.

Bowman, also the president and hearing aid specialist for J Bowman Hearing Service LLC of Martinsville, said this issue has been going on for several months with groups like the IHAA gearing up to lobby against companies that sell hearing aids online.

"This was tried a few years ago, but with the new health care system, everyone is looking for a cheap way around it — this is one of the results of that," Bowman said.

The Better Hearing Institute issued a similar warning to consumers in mid-October about the "risks associated with purchasing over-the-counter, one-size-fits-all hearing aids instead of consulting a hearing health care professional."

The warning came after HealthInnovations announced it would begin selling hearing aids for less than \$1,000 directly to users over the Internet.

"Today's state-of-the-art hearing aids should be programmed to the individual's specific hearing loss requirements in order to provide good levels of benefit and customer satisfaction. The process requires a complete in-person hearing assessment in a sound booth; the training and skills of a credentialed hearing healthcare professional to prescriptively fit the hearing aids using sophisticated computer programs; and appropriate in-person follow-up and counseling," Sergei Kochkin, executive director of BHI, said in a release. "This is not possible when consumers purchase one-size-fits-all hearing aids over the Internet or elsewhere."

Calculating costs

While online testing and the purchase of hearing aids may seem cheaper, it's simply not safe, Bowman said.

Lisa Busald, director of audiology at the Midwest Ear Institute, said more times than not, consumers end up spending more to pay for follow up services than they would buying the hearing aids through their doctor.

On average, a U.S. consumer will spend approximately \$2,000 on a hearing device, Busald said.

While patients may pay a little more for a visit prior to receiving their device, they will save in the long run because all followup services, maintenance and other programming is included in the cost, she said.

"The relationship with the audiologist is crucial in making sure that the devices are fitted correctly and functioning as they should," Busald said. "People are naive about the cost of services."

Hearing aids purchased through Bowman's office can cost anywhere from a couple hundred dollars to a few thousand, but come with appointments before, and after, the device arrives.

Bowman said she refuses to check instruments that are purchased over the Internet.

"I won't put my name on something to say that I checked it," Bowman said. "I don't want to be associated with something I cannot guarantee is safe."

"You wouldn't go online looking for glasses if you didn't know your prescription. It's no different with your ears and hearing."

Online tests that determine a person's hearing capabilities based on listening to sounds are also unreliable, Bowman said.

"There are different sound systems on different computers. You can't rely on that to judge your hearing," she said.

Since hearing aids are not "one size fits all," the dangers can include doing permanent damage to the ear canal if aids are not properly fitted or sound levels are not properly adjusted to fit the individual's hearing needs, Bowman said.

"To be fit properly is a service to the customer," she said. "That's just not possible online."

"You get what you pay for, but in this case, the hearing aids can have serious detrimental affects on the ear. One size does not fit all, and your hearing is so valuable. Why take the risk?"