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Ask about telecoils for hearing aids

By Stephen O. Frazier / Hearing Loss Support Specialist
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Back in the '90's I attended my first hearing-loss support meeting. As the meeting started, a lady asked, "Is the loop on?" "What's a loop?" I asked, and I was told it's a wire surrounding the room that silently sends sound to telecoils. "What's a telecoil?" I asked, and I learned it's a tiny antennae in hearing aids that receives the loop's signal. The hearing aid turns it into sound. I wondered, "Why wasn't I told about telecoils when I bought my hearing aids?" I've heard "why wasn't I told?" over and over at support meetings.

Telecoils add no cost and can be included in over 70 percent of current hearing aids and cochlear implants. With telecoil-equipped devices, background noise is dramatically reduced, and the voice of a performer is right at the ear with a loop. When I asked the "why" question, there was only one church in Albuquerque with a hearing loop, a loop at Hearing Loss Association meetings, and loops on some home TVs, so the answer from some providers that clients had no place to use telecoils might have appeared valid then.

That response is disingenuous, though. The telecoil's original purpose was for telephone use, to receive sound electromagnetically from the magnet in the phone's earpiece. I have a telephone, doesn't everyone? Also available were neckloops – devices worn around the neck and plugged into any sound-producing device with a headset jack. The neckloop and telecoils became a headset! Who doesn't have something a headset plugs into?

New Mexico today has 120 known looped venues, mostly in Albuquerque, including places of worship, theaters, City Council chambers and others. Other churches offer a neckloop option with their listening systems. Multiplex patrons can borrow a neckloop instead of a headset. Many landline and cell phones have headset/neckloop jacks, so the legitimacy of that "no place to use them" excuse appears invalid.

Now, years later, I'm still hearing, "Why didn't anyone tell me about telecoils?" from far too many hearing aid buyers. They were told about Bluetooth®[®], another wireless technology that cannot serve groups like a church congregation. A recent survey of wearers found only one-third of them were told about telecoils when first buying hearing aids. Another survey found hearing-aid wearers six times more likely to use a loop system than an FM or IR system that requires borrowing a receiver and, unless it has a neckloop, removing their hearing aids, gambling on damage or loss, and donning a headset.

Federal regulations now require that assistive listening systems (ALS) be hearing-aid compatible. They must either be a hearing loop, or 25 percent of the receivers for other systems must have neckloops, not headsets. New York City requires any new ALS funded with city dollars be hearing loops. There's a similar state law in Minnesota. Six states require providers to counsel clients in telecoils before selling them hearing aids.

Albuquerque is blessed with many competent, conscientious hearing care providers. They tell clients about telecoils, have a looped TV in their waiting and dispensing rooms and have brochures explaining telecoils. They include telecoils when demonstrating hearing aids prior to purchase so the client can determine if they would be helpful in challenging hearing situations. It appears, though, that many providers still don't tell clients about telecoils. I'm still getting the "why" question a lot.

My opinion: Many providers are making a decision that rightfully should be the prerogative of their client. The client should be told about the telecoils in order to make an educated decision on all options: Bluetooth® , streamers, rechargability and telecoils.

Don't know if your hearing aids have telecoils? Ask your provider – they may be there but never activated. If told yes, ask, "Why wasn't I told?" and request they be activated. If told "no," ask, "Why not?" If the answer's not acceptable, give some thought to finding a different provider, one who will tell you about all options, not just the ones he or she wants to sell you.

To learn more about loops/telecoils or to see the list of known looped venues in New Mexico:
www.LoopNM.com.

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