

Who is an audiologist?

Hearing is among our most important senses as it enables us to perceive sounds and connects us to our surroundings.

Hearing impairment results from a problem somewhere in the auditory system that affects our ability to hear some or all sounds. Ear problems could include balance problems that result from a defect in the vestibular part of the inner ear.

An audiologist is a non-medical specialist who works with individuals with hearing, balance and related ear problems. Audiologists are responsible for examining individuals of all ages, whether children or adults, who manifest symptoms that are symptomatic to hearing or balance disorders. The examination that an audiologist conducts is focused on identifying the presence of a problem, and is followed by a thorough assessment to identify the nature, degree and extent of the problem.

Once the assessment is over, the audiologist plans along with the patient the most appropriate and effective management protocol to implement in order to improve the condition and most importantly to assist the patient manage it. Audiologists provide clinical services to individuals with auditory or vestibular disorders and these services in general involve determining the hearing thresholds, type and degree of hearing loss in case of suspecting a hearing impairment, as well as assessing the impact hearing and balance problems have on an individual's life.

The audiologist interprets the obtained results and may coordinate them with medical, educational and psychological information to come up with a comprehensive diagnosis and then determine an appropriate course of management.

Audiologists work with other health care professionals like physicians, speech-language pathologists, educators and medical specialists to name a few as a team in the diagnosis and management process. Audiologists work in hospitals, private clinics, public and private schools, rehabilitation centres, colleges and universities and community centres.

The causes of hearing disorders vary in nature and have many causes, as some could be congenital whereas others are acquired due to an infection, trauma, exposure to hazardous noises, medication or aging.

Patients diagnosed with hearing or balance disorders that require medical or surgical intervention are referred by the audiologist to the respective physician for consultation and treatment. Those disorders that cannot be treated either medically or surgically could be assisted by means of a group of assistive listening devices like hearing instruments or cochlear implants as well as by enrollment in habilitation / rehabilitation programmes depending on the age of the patient and the type of the disorder.

The audiologist conducts a wide variety of examination and assessment tests to identify the problem, and these tests vary based on the age of the tested patient as well as the type of the suspected disorder.

Some tests require the cooperation of the patient as the audiologist presents some type of stimuli and the patient in turn is required to respond in a particular manner. If the patient is uncooperative as in the case of testing children, then a number of objective tests have been established to assist the specialist obtaining information on the status of the auditory system without the need of any action from the patient's side.

The tests are conducted in sound treated rooms or booths that contain special equipment and instruments to conduct audiological assessment.

The scope of the management process goes far beyond rehabilitation and hearing instrument or cochlear implant fitting as the audiologist is also responsible for offering proper counseling to the patient and his/her family. The audiologist has to make sure that the patient as well as the family fully understand the nature of the problem and its impact on the patient's life in terms of academic, social and vocational development, and if the patient is a child then the audiologist has to work thoroughly with the family and speech therapist to ensure that the child wears the hearing instruments constantly and also to monitor the child's language, social and intellectual development.

The audiologist's main concern is ensuring that every person regardless of their age benefits from the management approach being implemented.

In terms of assistive listening devices, audiologists are experts in this field and provide advice to patients on the most suitable system for their needs, and they are fully oriented in terms of the latest technology in hearing health care industry.

The job of an audiologist is not physically demanding, however, it requires attention and intense concentration. Additionally, the audiologist has to be able to perceive the emotional needs of his/her client and their families, and possesses the ability to relate to patients and families about the diagnosis of disability and audiologic habilitation/ rehabilitation plans, and explain technology development and devices that assist children and adults with hearing loss.

They also have to be able to communicate diagnostic test results, interpretations, and suggested management approaches in a manner that is easily understood by the patients and professionals. Audiologists need to approach problems objectively and provide support for patients and families, and since the progress of patients may be slow, patience, compassion and good listening skills are essential requirements in an audiologist.

Prepared by: Rania A. Abul-Rub
Head Audiologist
Jordan HearingTec