Assistive technology helps people who are deaf and hard of hearing live more independently and safely. Technology advancements have led to more access, choices and connections for many people.

Where to purchase
A few devices, such as doorbells with volume control and visual alert smoke detectors, may be available at larger chain stores or online stores. However, many devices are only available from specialty retailers. We can provide a vendor list to help you find retailers.

As with all technology, prices vary widely. Consider the features and benefits that are important to you, as well as your budget.

Alerting devices
Alerting devices use a loud tone, flashing lights or vibrations to alert people with hearing loss to various environmental sounds.

Most devices work by sending signals to receivers in your home or office. The receiver produces a visual alert (flashing light) or a vibrating alert. Some devices work with existing alarms and doorbells, making additional electrical wiring unnecessary.

- Baby cry signaler: Alerts when baby sounds are detected. Sensitivity is adjustable.
- Carbon monoxide detector: Alerts if carbon monoxide exceeds safe levels. Detectors may be hardwired, plug-in or battery powered.
- Doorbell signaler: Alerts when someone is at the door. Works with or without an existing doorbell system.
- Smoke alarm signaler: Alerts if the smoke alarm is activated. Some alarms have built-in strobe lights.

- Telephone signaler: Alerts when the phone is ringing. Some signalers plug into the telephone line and electrical outlet. Other signalers attach to the side of the telephone.
- Wake-up alarm signaler: Alerts when alarm clock goes off. Products range from portable alarm clocks with built-in strobe lights to alarm clocks with a built-in outlet where a lamp or vibrating alert can be plugged in.
- Weather alert: Reports upcoming storms or dangerous weather conditions. The Weather Alert Radio can be used alone or in conjunction with other alert devices.

Telephone devices

Amplified ringers
Various types of ringers can be attached to a telephone line to inform a person who is hard of hearing that the telephone is ringing.

Amplified telephone
- Telephones with built-in amplifiers that range from 25 to 55 decibels.
- Many have variable tone selectors and loud ringers.
Portable phone amplifier
A lightweight battery-operated device with an adjustable volume control that fits over the listening end of the handset.

TTY (or TDD)
- Telephone device with a keyboard and a text display screen.
- Users communicate over the telephone by typing and reading their conversations.
- Calls are made through a relay service. This is different from texting because it allows the user to call landline phones.
- Portable and wireless TTYs are also available.
- Videophone
  - A web camera and video screen that allows people who use sign language to make telephone calls.
  - Requires an internet connection.
  - Calls are made through a video relay service (VRS). A sign language interpreter facilitates communication between the person who uses sign language and the non-signing person.
  - Today, many people use videophone technology rather than a TTY.

Voice carry over (VCO) telephone
- For people who have difficulty hearing over the telephone and prefer to use their voice to communicate.
- Voice carry over calls are made through a relay service.
- Using a voice carry over phone the person with the hearing loss can speak and listen to the other party. At the same time the person can read what the other party is saying on the telephone’s display screen.
- There is also a portable VCO device, which can be attached to cell phones, pay phones or cordless phones.

Captioned telephone
- For people who have difficulty hearing over the telephone and prefer to use their voice to communicate.
- Requires internet service.
- Captioned calls are made through a relay service.
- Using a captioned phone the person with the hearing loss can speak and listen to the other party. At the same time the person can read captions of what the other party is saying on the telephone’s display screen.
- Today, many people are using captioned phones rather than VCO telephones.

Assistive listening devices

Audio induction or hearing loop
- Transmits sound via a microphone, an amplifier and wiring that encircles the seating area.
- To pick up the signals, hearing aid users must have a T (telecoil) switch or program on their hearing aids and sit within or near the wired area.

FM system
- Transmits sound wirelessly via radio waves.
- The speaker wears a compact transmitter and microphone and the listener wears a portable receiver.
- The receiver may have a headphone, neckloop or other accessories.
- Commonly used for group meetings, church settings, conferences and classes. It may be used both indoors and outdoors.

Infrared system
- Transmits sound wirelessly via invisible light beams.
- The receiver must be in direct line of sight of the light beam from the transmitter.
- Commonly used in churches, theaters and auditoriums. It can only be used indoors; sunlight may interfere with transmission.
- There are infrared devices made just for home television listening. The transmitter is placed on the TV and plugs into an electrical outlet. The user wears a battery-powered headset (receiver) with volume control. The TV volume can then be set at a comfortable level for other listeners.
Personal amplified system
- A portable device that transmits sound via a microphone and transmitter to headphones, an earphone or a neck loop.
- Useful for one-on-one conversations or TV listening.
- Can be used indoors or outdoors.

Bluetooth system
- Transmits sound via Wi-Fi.
- Works directly with hearing aids that have Bluetooth.
- Individuals with hearing loss who do not use hearing aids can use a smartphone or tablet with earphones to connect to the wirelessly transmitted sound.

Captioning

Closed captioning
- These symbols indicate captioning is available.
- Captions require a closed-caption decoder or decoder chip built into the TV.
- To turn on closed captions on your TV, check the owner’s manual for instructions.
- To turn on closed captions for a DVD, look for “Subtitles for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing” (or SDH) in the subtitles menu.
- To access closed captions in a movie theater, ask the theater staff for a decoder device.

Open captioning
- Captions are a permanent part of the picture.
- No need to use a decoder or turn on the captions.

Real time captioning
- Captions are prepared and transmitted by trained real-time captioners at the same time the event is happening.
- Commonly used for live entertainment events, television news broadcasts, lectures, conferences and classes.

Smartphone and tablet apps
- Apps can turn your smartphone or tablet into a signaler, assistive listening device, accessible telephone device or caption viewer.
- Apps from hearing aid manufacturers and smart home technology devices can provide both alerts and remote controls.
- Available apps depend on your device and your operating system (iOS or Android).
- Purchase apps through the App Store (iOS or Apple devices) or Google Play (Android devices).

Contact us
Contact the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Division for personalized recommendations that meet your needs.
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