Recommended Citation:

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 86-600511

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents
US. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402
Hearing impairment is very common among elderly people and can seriously affect their quality of life, personal safety, and ability to function independently. This OTA background paper discusses the prevalence of hearing impairment and its impact on elderly people; hearing devices and services that may benefit them; and problems in the service delivery system that limit access to these devices and services.

This background paper is part of the OTA assessment of Technology and Aging in America that was requested by the Senate Special Committee on Aging and the House Select Committee on Aging, and endorsed by the House Committee on Education and Labor. For that assessment OTA selected five chronic conditions for in-depth analysis because of their prevalence and severe impact on elderly people and because of the potential role of technology in their treatment. Hearing impairment is one of these conditions; the others are dementia, urinary incontinence, osteoarthritis, and osteoporosis.

Many of the chronic conditions that affect elderly people, including the types of hearing impairment that are most common, cannot be cured with available medical and surgical treatments. As a result, some elderly people, their families, and others assume that these conditions are not treatable. Yet assistive technologies can often help to maintain functioning even when the underlying disease or condition cannot be cured. In the case of hearing impairment, these technologies include hearing aids, infrared and FM assistive listening devices, telephone amplification devices and other telecommunication systems, signaling and alarm devices, and environmental design and aural rehabilitation techniques. Used singly or in combination, these technologies can facilitate communication and help to maintain an independent lifestyle for many hearing impaired people.

As more and more Americans live to older ages, the prevalence of chronic conditions that cause functional impairment is expected to increase. Along with biomedical research on the causes and possible cures for these conditions, the development and increased use of technologies that compensate for functional impairment are among the most hopeful approaches to improving the quality of life of elderly people.

OTA was assisted in the preparation of this background paper by many outside advisors and reviewers, including biomedical and social science researchers, physicians, audiologists, and representatives of the hearing aid dealers and hearing aid manufacturers associations. We express sincere appreciation to each of these individuals and organizations. As with all OTA reports, the content of this background paper is the responsibility of the Office and does not necessarily represent the views of outside advisors or reviewers.
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Acknowledgments

This project has benefited from the advice of many experts in the field of hearing impairment and hearing services. OTA especially would like to thank the following advisors, reviewers, and contractors for their assistance and support.

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