

My name is Jaime Onofrio, and I am a licensed audiologist in the State of Maine who is credentialed with MaineCare. I would like to speak for a few minutes in favor of LD 167 and the importance of using two hearing aids to treat bilateral hearing loss.

There is well known research about the benefits of using two hearing aids with bilateral hearing loss. It helps us hear better in more difficult listening environments (background noise, noisy rooms) and improves localization of environmental sounds. Individuals with two hearing aids can use these devices to hear telephone calls in both ears and appropriately amplified for their hearing loss, which improves speech understanding. Two hearing aids can also relieve bilateral tinnitus, as a single hearing aid cannot mask tinnitus in both ears.

There is growing research on the relationship between hearing loss and cognition. Research is indicating there is a relationship between hearing loss and dementia. There are many theories on why this relationship exists. There is a theory about cell atrophy – if you do not use certain brain pathways, then the brain will stop using this connection. The connection between dementia, social isolation, and hearing loss is also impactful. Individuals with significant hearing loss tend to withdraw from social situations and personal connections, leading to social isolation. There is a well-known relationship between social isolation and dementia

There is also a link between hearing loss and fall risk. When a person has more awareness of their environment, it helps prevent falls. Hearing aids help increase environmental awareness by hearing environmental sounds and recognizing the type of environment we are in, such a large room or being outside. With hearing aid use, individuals do not have to use as many cognitive resources to hear their environment and can focus more on keeping their balance.

In short, MaineCare will provide one hearing aid if the member meets the hearing loss criteria (41 dB or greater hearing loss) for adults 21+. There are guidelines for MaineCare to cover a set of hearing aids for adults, but these guidelines are more restrictive, and many Mainers do not qualify under these criteria. This criterion involves blindness and student status. Mainers under age 21 have coverage for two hearing aids without prior authorization. For these Mainers with only one hearing aid obtained through MaineCare, I work with other state-funded organizations who help them obtain a matching hearing aid (assuming they have bilateral hearing loss). I have worked with other state organizations such as Vocational Rehabilitation for Mainers who are employed and Disability Rights Maine for Mainers 65+ who meet income guidelines. A matching hearing aid, which is the same model for both ears, is important, as the two hearing aids communicate with each other to improve background noise reductions and pair to the same smartphone app for volume control and more connectivity features.

The handout provided to you today has a summary of the information discussed and also my sources. I thank you for your time today, and I would encourage the committee to move forward with LD 167. Thank you.



Benefits of Hearing Aid Use^{1, 2}

- Reduced fatigue in listening environments, such as conversations and watching television.
- Hearing environmental sounds, such as the refrigerator, footsteps, and nature
- Reduces background noise in noisy environments (restaurants, large groups)
- Improved speech understanding on the telephone and when communicating with friends and loved ones
- Supports cognitive health – decreased listening effort allows for cognitive processing to be used on other tasks

Sources

1. "Benefits of Hearing Aids." *OHSU Ear, Nose & Throat*, www.ohsu.edu/ent/benefits-hearing-aids. Accessed 27 Feb. 2025.
2. Center for Devices and Radiological Health. "Hearing Aid Benefits and Limitations." *U.S. Food and Drug Administration, FDA*, 18 Nov. 2022,
3. "Will I Need Hearing Aids for Both Ears?" *Starkey*, www.starkey.com/hearing-aids/do-you-need-two-hearing-aids. Accessed 27 Feb. 2025.
4. "Hearing Loss and the Risk of Dementia." *Alzheimer's Society*, Aug. 2024, www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-dementia/managing-the-risk-of-dementia/reduce-your-risk-of-dementia/hearing-loss.
5. Aubrey, Allison. "Hearing Loss Can Lead to Deadly Falls, but Hearing Aids May Cut the Risk." *NPR*, NPR, 13 Nov. 2023, www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/11/13/1212051086/hearing-aids-hearing-loss-falls-injury-aging-older-adults.



**LITERATURE TO
SUPPORT LD 167 "AN
ACT TO PROVIDE 2
HEARING AIDS TO
MAINECARE MEMBERS
WITH DIAGNOSED
HEARING LOSS"**



Benefits of Using Two Hearing Aids^{1, 3}

- Ability to localize sounds – the brain can identify where a sound is coming from based on time, loudness, and pitch differences. If one ear hears differently than the other, the brain will have difficulty with sound localization
- Promoting brain health - if the brain only uses one ear to hear, then the auditory pathway on the other ear is not used and may atrophy with time
- Improved ability to hear speech in noisy environments – binaural hearing aids work together to reduce background noise, which makes it easier to separate speech from background noise
- Masks tinnitus – a single hearing aid cannot mask tinnitus in both ears. Hearing aids are often recommended for tinnitus relief

Hearing Loss and Dementia⁴

- Studies have shown that the amount of time the person has had hearing loss and severity of hearing loss impacts dementia risk. Risk of dementia is three times higher when a person has a moderate untreated hearing loss and nearly five times higher risk for dementia with severe untreated hearing loss
- Those with untreated hearing loss are at much higher risks for social isolation and depression, which are also risk factors of dementia

Hearing Loss and Fall Risk⁵

- Injuries due to falls are the top cause of death in people 65 and older
- Older adults with mild hearing loss are at double the risk of falling
- We use our hearing to sense our environment, hearing aids help provide greater awareness to environmental sounds
- If individuals use more cognitive resources to understand others, there are fewer cognitive resources to help maintain balance

