

Direct Access Fact Sheet

What is Direct Access?

"Direct Access" means giving Medicare beneficiaries the *option* of going directly to a qualified audiologist for hearing and balance diagnostic tests. The Academy of Doctors of Audiology believes that Medicare beneficiaries should be able to decide whether to see either a physician or an audiologist first for hearing healthcare.

ADA supports Direct Access legislation because:

Direct Access would provide for the delivery of high-quality patient care.

Audiologists are highly-educated, licensed health care professionals. In fact, they are the only professionals who are university trained and licensed to specifically identify, evaluate, diagnose, and treat hearing disorders. Audiologists must currently earn a professional degree (the Doctor of Audiology, or Au.D.), which typically involves 4 years of academic and clinical training in audiology, following a traditional 4-year bachelor's degree in order to enter the profession. Further, audiologists are trained to recognize problems requiring medical attention and to immediately refer such patients to a physician.

Direct Access is cost-effective.

The requirement of an initial physician visit prior to a visit to an audiologist is costly to the Medicare program. During the initial appointment, audiologists perform a number of procedures, including case history, otoscopy, and immittance, that serve as a screening for medical conditions. As a result, entry into the hearing healthcare system can be made safely without a perfunctory physician visit.

Medicare already allows beneficiaries Direct Access to a range of non-physician practitioners.

Medicare beneficiaries do not need a physician referral to see a dentist, oral surgeon, podiatrist, optometrist, chiropractor, clinical nurse specialist, clinical psychologist, clinical social worker, nurse-midwife, nurse practitioner, and physician assistant.

Other federal programs already allow Direct Access to an audiologist.

The Medicare program should keep pace with other federal health care programs and private health plans that already allow Direct Access to audiologists. For example, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has allowed veterans Direct Access to audiologists for the past 15 years, with successful results. Direct Access has enabled the VA to provide high-quality, cost-effective hearing health care to veterans. The Office of Personnel Management allows Federal employees and Members of Congress to directly access audiologists through the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program. Also, many private health plans, including most preferred provider organizations (PPOs), allow their enrollees Direct Access to audiologists.

- **Direct Access would not expand the scope of practice for audiology.**
- **Direct Access would not diminish the important role played by physicians.**