

INCREASING ACCESSIBILITY OF COCHLEAR IMPLANTS IN OLDER ADULTS THROUGH EXPANSION OF INSURANCE COVERAGE – SARAH HODGE, MD

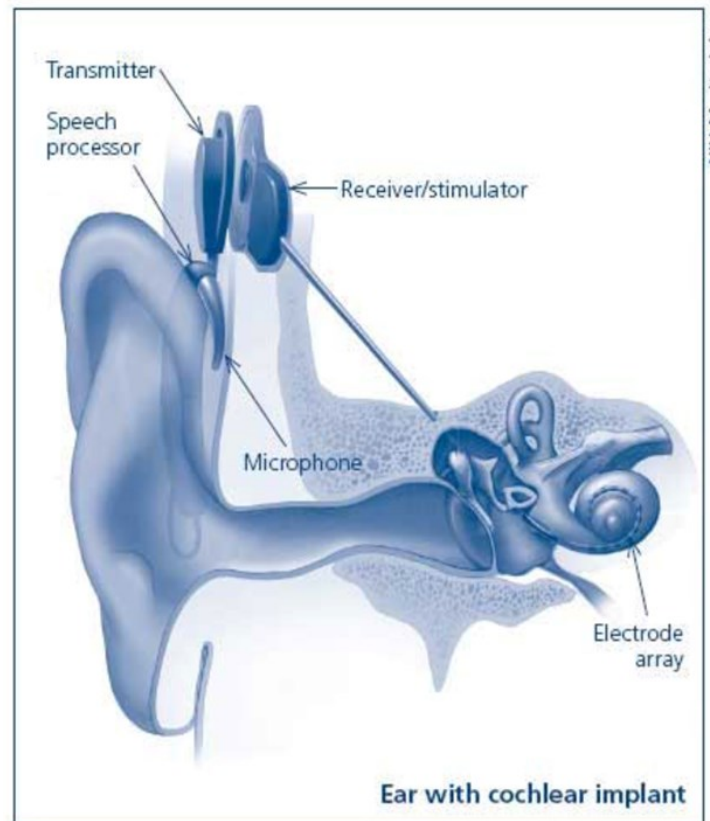
The subject of hearing loss has recently obtained nationwide media coverage due to the approval of over-the-counter hearing aid sales. Unlike hearing aids, however, cochlear implants (CIs) are typically covered by Medicare, Medicaid and most private health insurance plans if certain auditory criteria are met. Until recently, the candidacy criteria for Medicare beneficiaries was actually more rigorous than the FDA guidelines for cochlear implants. This stringent criteria however, was changed on September 26, 2022 when the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) elected to expand coverage for cochlear implants effective immediately. This CMS update means that people who would not have previously qualified for Medicare coverage of a cochlear implant, may now be candidates. This landmark change therefore increases the accessibility of a cochlear implant to millions of additional individuals. With this expanded criteria, older adults are eligible for a CI when their best-aided sentence recognition score is \geq 60%. Previously, adults receiving cochlear implants under Medicare were limited to best-aided sentence recognition scores of \leq 40%.

Unchanged Medicare Criteria for Cochlear Implantation include:

1. Diagnosis of bilateral moderate-to-profound sensorineural hearing impairment with limited benefit from appropriate hearing (or vibrotactile) aids;
2. Cognitive ability to use auditory clues and a willingness to undergo an extended program of rehabilitation;
3. Freedom from middle ear infection, an accessible cochlear lumen that is structurally suited to implantation, and freedom from lesions in the auditory nerve and acoustic areas of the central nervous system;
4. No contraindications to surgery; and

The device must be used in accordance with Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved labeling¹.

This momentous change represents the first major initiative undertaken by the organized American Cochlear Implant Alliance (ACI Alliance). In 2013, this group sought to explore and evaluate CI candidacy in older adults. It was noted that though many older adults had hearing that was deemed “too good” for a CI based on Medicare criteria, many still experienced significant challenges in communication despite use of hearing aids. To address these concerns and to evaluate the need for expanded Medicare criteria, a study was proposed by the ACI Alliance to the CMS.



A multicenter nonrandomized trial was approved to examine pre- and postoperative speech recognition, hearing device benefit, telephone communication, health utility and quality of life for 34 participants². All were 65 years of age or older, had bilateral moderate to profound hearing loss, and had best-aided preoperative sentence test scores in quiet between 41-60%². Ultimately, the study found that intervention with a cochlear implant was associated with notable improvements in word, sentence, and telephone recognition scores². These findings were instrumental in the nationwide expansion of Medicare criteria for cochlear implantation.

Continued work within the field has served to only further improve our understanding of cochlear implantation and its effect on quality of life, cognition, and general health. Early identification of hearing loss and appropriate auditory rehabilitation is important in people of all ages to mitigate negative consequences which can include cognitive decline, particularly in older people³. Individuals with untreated hearing loss had a twofold, threefold, and fivefold increased risk of dementia depending on whether they exhibited mild, moderate, and severe hearing loss respectively, when compared to normal hearing subjects³. Therefore it is thought that intervention with a cochlear implant in the appropriate patient can help to mitigate not only the hearing loss, but the associated downstream quality of life and cognitive issues that can develop⁴. Overall, the expanded Medicare criteria for cochlear implantation is an exciting advancement in the armamentarium of hearing specialists as it broadens the treatment algorithm for millions of additional patients who struggle with hearing loss.

References:

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3. Lin FR Hear and Now. (2020). *Cerebrum* <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33216829/>
4. McRackan TR, Bauschard M, Hatch JL, Franko-Tobin E, Droghini R 2018 Meta-analysis of quality of life improvement after cochlear implantation and associations with speech recognition abilities *The Laryngoscope* 128 982 990 <https://doi.org/10.1002/lary.26738>