Assistive Devices for Seniors
The second in a three part series on assistive technology
By Carole Larkin and Elaine Wiant

In the last issue, we discussed "low tech" assistive devices for people with vision, hearing and motor problems. This article and the next address "high tech" assistive devices.

Q. My mom likes to read books, but has vision problems. She can get some large print books from the library, but the selection is limited. Do you have any suggestions?

A. One option is listening to books. The selection is vast from the library, at bookstores, and online. If she has a computer, a pocket PC, an MP3, an Ipod, or even a CD player, she can download audible books from www.audible.com. You can get one free book to see if it works for your mom.

If she prefers to read, rather than listen, to books, an option is "ebooks". Ebooks are available online for download to a computer or portable reader. See the next questions for information about enlarging the text.

Q. My dad loves to use the computer. He likes to email the grandkids, read news, books, etc. He has limited vision. Is there a way to enlarge the print on the monitor?

A. Yes! If he uses a Microsoft operating system (Windows), go to http://www.microsoft.com/enable/guides/vision.aspx?v=f#step1 to find out how to set options in the software he uses to enlarge text. If he has a Mac (Apple), go to http://www.apple.com/accessibility/vision for useful information. The Mac also provides "VoiceOver", a spoken interface that provides access through speech, audible cues, and keyboard navigation. A Windows version of spoken interface is called "Text-to-Speech Playback". In both systems you can also make changes to the cursor, icons, sounds, colors, etc. He might also benefit from a keyboard with large keys or large print, available at www.enablemart.com and www.infogrip.com.

Q. My friends use computers and my grandkids want to send me email. I'm not sure I can use a computer because I have problems with shakiness of my hands. What can I do to use a computer when I have trouble with the keyboard and mouse?

A. People who have problems with limited hand function can use a variety of devices to help. Start by trying the simplest options, such as an ergonomic or large print keyboard. If you can't press two keys at the same time (for capitalizing words, etc.), you can use a feature called "Sticky Keys". It is built into both Windows and Mac systems (find the wheelchair icon on the control panel). If that doesn't work, you might benefit from:

- **Speech recognition systems**, also called voice recognition programs, allow people to give commands and enter data using their voices rather than a mouse or keyboard. These systems require some training and practice, so be patient.

(Examples are ViaVoice from IBM for both Windows and Mac, NaturallySpeaking for Windows, and iListen for the Mac.

- **On-screen keyboard programs** provide an image of a standard or modified keyboard on the computer screen. The user selects the keys with a mouse, touch screen, trackball, joystick, switch, or electronic pointing device.
- **Keyboard filters** include typing aids, such as word prediction utilities and add-on spelling checkers. These products reduce the required number of keystrokes. Keyboard filters enable users to quickly access the letters they need and to avoid inadvertently selecting keys they don't want.
- **Touch screens** are devices placed on the computer monitor (or built into it) that allow direct selection or activation of the computer by touching the screen.
- **Alternative input devices** (including alternative keyboards, electronic pointing devices, sip-and-puff systems, wands and sticks, joysticks and trackballs) allow individuals to control their computers through means other than a standard keyboard or pointing device.

Check www.enablemart.com and www.infogrip.com for specific items. For Microsoft users, go to http://www.microsoft.com/enable/guides/dexterity.aspx#step20 for more information. For Mac users, go to http://www.apple.com/accessibility/physical/. Note: Be sure to check that the computer has enough memory to handle any new software you buy and that the operating system (e.g. Windows 98, Windows XP) is adequate. You may need to upgrade both memory and operating system in order to use some of the latest technology.

Contact ThirdAge Services for more information on these and other issues relating to older adults at 214-741-4397 or 214-649-1392 or ewiant@thirdageservices.com.

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