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## HOW TO Hear Better Now

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### Section:

#### FEATURES

**Should you opt for a traditional hearing aid? Or one of the new over-the-counter devices, which are easier to buy and may be more affordable? The expert advice here can help you decide.**

Have you held off on getting hearing aids because the process (multiple appointments for choosing and adjusting the device) and stiff prices (often several thousand dollars) seem daunting? We've got good news.

There's now a new category of hearing aids, and they're available over the counter. That means you no longer need to see a licensed hearing professional or have a prescription in order to purchase them. You can buy an OTC hearing aid at a store like Walgreens or Best Buy and even get one online.

The price is right, too: The new OTC hearing aids usually cost about \$200 to \$1,000 a pair, while prescription aids can run from about \$1,000 to more than \$6,000 a pair. And OTC aids may be an option for up to 90 percent of people with hearing loss—those with mild-to-moderate problems.

"Hearing technology is merging with consumer technology and bringing a lot more options than traditional hearing aids," says Vinaya Manchaiah, PhD, director of audiology at UCHealth University of Colorado Hospital.

That's important, because studies show that hearing aids can improve the quality of life and stave of feelings of loneliness for those with hearing loss. The condition has also been linked to a greater likelihood of dementia, and recent evidence suggests that treating it with aids could potentially help reduce that risk.

But how do you know whether OTC devices are right for you? Can they be as effective as prescription aids? And how can you choose a hearing aid without professional help? Here's what to know.

## The Evolution of OTCs

While some hearing devices have long been sold online or by mail order without a prescription, they were loosely regulated, so there were few guardrails in place to ensure that they worked. But thanks to a 2017 law designed to make hearing aids more accessible and affordable, there is now a clear set of rules for OTC aids. These rules, which went into effect in the fall of 2022, require that hearing aids sold without a prescription meet specific standards for safety and effectiveness. And they can't be sold to children.

OTC aids must also comply with certain technical requirements, including restrictions on how much they can amplify sound, which is intended to protect users from hearing damage. These restrictions, however, also make OTC aids unsuitable for people with severe hearing loss. (Signs include being unable to hear spoken words even in a quiet room or trouble hearing loud music or power tools.) That's why OTC aids are specifically intended for people with self-perceived mild-to-moderate hearing loss. (Signs include trouble hearing speech in noisy places, in groups, and during phone calls.)

## Rx Aids vs. OTC

OTC and prescription aids function in essentially the same way. Both pick up sounds with tiny microphones, amplify them, and transmit them to your ear via a speaker. And they use similar technology to do this.

Perhaps the most significant difference between OTC and traditional aids isn't the technology they use but how you go about obtaining them—and in some cases, setting them up.

With prescription hearing aids, you go to a healthcare provider such as an audiologist, an otolaryngologist, or a licensed hearing aid specialist. These providers test your hearing and evaluate your needs, and help you decide on the hearing aid that might be best for you. They also program the device you select so it's set up for your specific hearing

profile—i.e., a “fitting”—and provide follow-up adjustments as needed.

With OTC hearing aids, there’s no requirement to go to a provider or even have a hearing test before settling on a device. And any setup and adjustments may be largely up to you.

### The Right Aid for You

Given the differences we noted above, if you’re thinking about buying hearing aids, you’ll want to carefully consider whether a prescription or OTC version is best. These steps can help.

▷ Rule out other problems. Hearing loss can sometimes be caused by issues such as infections, earwax buildup, or certain injuries. Hearing aids won’t fix these problems, but other treatments may help. So it’s important to have a doctor check your ears if you notice any of the following: blood, pus, or fluid coming out of your ears; ear pain or discomfort; feelings of dizziness or vertigo; or sudden changes in your hearing. You can also use an online tool called the Consumer Ear Disease Risk Assessment to help you determine if such issues are at fault (available at [sites.northwestern.edu/cedra](https://sites.northwestern.edu/cedra)).

▷ Get your hearing tested. The gold standard for assessing hearing is a test with a hearing care provider such as an audiologist, according to experts we spoke with. This can give you a precise measure of your hearing loss, says Jasleen Singh, PhD, a postdoctoral scholar at Northwestern University’s Auditory Research Lab. And that’s key in helping you determine if your hearing loss is too severe for OTC aids.

Even with milder hearing loss, you may want professional help if you have complex hearing needs—say, you work in a classroom full of kids with sounds all around, says Sumit Dhar, PhD, a professor in the department of communication sciences and disorders at Northwestern University.

In-person hearing tests are usually covered by private medical insurance, and as of this year, Medicare will pay for general hearing evaluations without a doctor’s referral.

There are also plenty of ways to assess your hearing at home using your computer or smartphone. These include tone-based testing apps, where audio tones are played in decreasing volumes, and digits-in-noise or speech-in-noise tests, where you try to identify spoken numbers or words while background noise plays.

Mimi and SonicCloud are reliable iPhone apps for tone-based testing, according to experts with the Johns Hopkins Cochlear Center for Hearing and Public Health. The World Health Organization’s hearing test app, hearWHO, uses the digits-in-noise method, as does online screening offered by Best Buy.

▷ Consider your DIY comfort level. Vinaya Manchaiah at the University of Colorado Hospital recommends thinking through whether you're in a position to manage the selection and setup of OTC aids on your own. While some companies offer high levels of phone-based or online support (see below), you still have to pick a device, figure out its settings, and in some cases, program it. You'll also need to learn how to put it on correctly and clean it, and troubleshoot problems. When you buy prescription hearing aids, an audiologist, doctor, or licensed hearing aid dispenser helps you with all of those tasks.

## Choosing an OTC Aid

If you decide that an OTC hearing aid may work for you, the following can help you narrow down your choices.

▷ How customizable is it? OTC hearing aids come in two types: self-fitting and preset. Self-fitting aids tend to be costlier, but they're subject to more FDA scrutiny than presets, which means you can feel more confident that they've been proved to work. And self-fitting OTC aids are far more customizable.

With a self-fitting hearing aid, you'll typically use a smartphone app during the initial setup to help you adjust the device to suit your specific hearing issues. In addition to determining the level of amplification needed, these apps can zero in on such factors as which frequencies of sound you have the most trouble hearing.

Because self-fitting hearing aids can be more finely tuned than preset ones, they probably offer you a greater chance of getting the best possible settings for your needs, says Nicholas Reed, AuD, an assistant professor of audiology with the Johns Hopkins Cochlear Center for Hearing and Public Health.

But some users may find the self-fitting process difficult. And self-fitting aids may not be accessible to everyone. Jabra's Enhance Plus self-fitting hearing aids work only with Apple devices, for example, so check before you buy.

Preset OTC aids come with a number of set programs, each one for different levels of hearing loss in the mild-to-moderate range. But these may be good enough for many users. A study published in the American Journal of Audiology in 2021 found that devices with presets fit the hearing needs of 68 percent of older adults with mild-to-moderate hearing loss.

▷ What shape works best for you? Like prescription hearing aids, OTC devices come in two basic shapes: in the ear or behind the ear. In-the-ear aids tend to be smaller, sometimes small enough to fit completely inside the ear canal. Behind-the-ear aids consist of connected pieces: a case that contains the device's hardware and sits behind the ear, and a receiver that sits in the canal or an earbud.

Does one shape work better than the other? “I actually tend to think whatever hearing aid you want to wear and you will wear more and you like wearing, you should pick that one,” says Laura Coco, AuD, PhD, an assistant professor in the School of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences at San Diego State University. Still, she notes that behind-the-ear styles tend to be slightly better at filtering out background noise.

Smaller devices also tend to be a bit more difficult to manipulate and clean, and may have less capacity for features like wireless audio streaming, says Anna Jilla, AuD, PhD, an assistant professor of audiology at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. ▷ How good is the customer support? One of the advantages of buying hearing aids through an audiologist or other hearing professional is that you have an expert helping you figure out how to customize, use, and troubleshoot your hearing aid. That support may make a difference. In one study, people who got hearing aids either through an audiologist or OTC reaped similar benefits—but those who saw an audiologist expressed more satisfaction with their hearing aids.

It would be unfortunate if people who could benefit from an OTC hearing aid ended up not using them because of insufficient assistance, says Larry Humes, PhD, an author of that study and a distinguished professor emeritus of speech, language, and hearing sciences at Indiana University. “Not because the device isn’t good—it meets FDA guidelines, it’s a good-quality device,” he says. “But all the extra support somebody needs in adjusting to hearing aids that normally could be provided through an audiologist isn’t available.”

That’s why it’s critical to find out exactly what support you’ll have access to with the hearing aid you’re buying, including what days and hours the support is available, for how long after your purchase, and what sorts of experts will be providing it. For example, while most companies have phone-based customer support, in some cases the people you reach when you call may not have any special expertise with hearing aids. Other companies will connect you to licensed hearing care professionals via phone or even at walk-in stores in your area.

▷ What’s the return policy? It takes time to get used to hearing aids and figure out whether they’re really working for you or not. A return policy of at least a month should give you the opportunity to thoroughly try out your OTC hearing aid but send it back if it’s simply not helping you sufficiently. As you shop, compare different products’ warranty periods, too.

## 8 OTC Brands on the Market Now

The number of OTC hearing aid brands will probably grow in the near future, but these are already available in some stores and online. Here’s what they offer and what they cost.

## Eargo

MODELS: 5, 6, 7

PRESET OR SELF-FITTING? Self-fitting.

BATTERY TYPE: Rechargeable.

RETURN POLICY: 45 days if purchased from Eargo; 60 days if purchased from Best Buy.

CUSTOMER SERVICE: Phone-based support, including with hearing professionals.

PRICE PER PAIR: From \$1,950 for Eargo 5 to \$2,650 for Eargo 7.

CONNECTED DEVICE: Pairs with an app for iOS or Android.

WARRANTY PERIOD: 1 or 2 years.

## Go Hearing

MODELS: Go Lite, Go Prime

PRESET OR SELF-FITTING? Preset. (Go Lite offers volume control only.)

BATTERY TYPE: Rechargeable.

RETURN POLICY: 45 days if purchased from Go Hearing; 60 days if purchased from Best Buy.

CUSTOMER SERVICE: Phone-based support.

PRICE PER PAIR: Go Lite: \$199; Go Prime: \$299.

CONNECTED DEVICE: None.

WARRANTY PERIOD: 1 year.

## Hearing Assist

MODELS: A wide array.

PRESET OR SELF-FITTING?

Preset.

BATTERY TYPE: Rechargeable and replaceable battery models.

RETURN POLICY: 60 days.

CUSTOMER SERVICE: Phone-based support. Optional setup call with a licensed hearing professional after purchase.

PRICE PER PAIR: \$399 to \$699.

CONNECTED DEVICE: Some models pair with an app for iOS or Android.

WARRANTY PERIOD: 1 year.

HP

MODELS: Hearing Pro

PRESET OR SELF-FITTING? Self-fitting.

BATTERY TYPE: Rechargeable.

RETURN POLICY: 60 days.

CUSTOMER SERVICE: Phone-based support, including the option to speak with licensed audiologists.

PRICE PER PAIR: \$699.

CONNECTED DEVICE: Pairs with an app for iOS or Android.

WARRANTY PERIOD: 2 years.

Jabra

MODELS: Enhance Plus

PRESET OR SELF-FITTING? Self-fitting.

BATTERY TYPE: Rechargeable.

RETURN POLICY: 45 days if purchased from Jabra; 60 days if purchased from Best Buy.

CUSTOMER SERVICE: Phone-based support service. Customers can also go to a certified Jabra Enhance Center for help. (To find one, go to [jabra.com/hearing/enhancecenter-locator](https://jabra.com/hearing/enhancecenter-locator).) Service fees may apply.

PRICE PER PAIR: \$799.

CONNECTED DEVICE: Pairs with an app for iOS only.

WARRANTY PERIOD: 1 year.

Lexie

MODELS: B1 Powered by Bose, B2 Powered by Bose, Lumen

PRESET OR SELF-FITTING? Self-fitting.

BATTERY TYPE: B1, Lumen: replaceable battery. B2: rechargeable.

RETURN POLICY: 45 days if purchased from Lexie; 60 days if purchased from Best Buy.

CUSTOMER SERVICE: Phone support and video-call support via an app.

PRICE PER PAIR: B1: \$749; B2: \$999; Lumen: \$699.

CONNECTED DEVICE: Pairs with an app for iOS or Android.

WARRANTY PERIOD: 1 year.



Lucid

MODELS: A wide array.

PRESET OR SELF-FITTING?

Preset.

BATTERY TYPE: Rechargeable and replaceable battery models.

RETURN POLICY: 90 days if purchased from Lucid or Sam's Club; 60 days if purchased elsewhere.

CUSTOMER SERVICE: Phone and video-based support with licensed hearing professionals. You can also go to a Lucid Hearing center for in-person support.

PRICE PER PAIR: \$199 to \$999.

CONNECTED DEVICE: Some models pair with an app for iOS or Android.

WARRANTY PERIOD: 1 year.

Sony

MODELS: CRE-C10, CRE-E10

PRESET OR SELF-FITTING? Self-fitting.

BATTERY TYPE: CRE-C10: replaceable battery; CRE-E10: rechargeable.

RETURN POLICY: 45 days if purchased from Sony; 60 days if purchased from Best Buy.

CUSTOMER SERVICE: Support via Sony.

PRICE PER PAIR: CRE-C10: \$999.99; CRE-E10: \$1299.99.

CONNECTED DEVICE: Pairs with an app for iOS or Android.

WARRANTY PERIOD: 1 year.

## Rx Aids: Ratings of Brands and Retailers

Many prescription devices remain available for people with severe hearing loss or those with mild-to-moderate hearing loss who want the assistance of a professional when buying hearing aids. If you're in one of those groups, **Consumer Reports'** survey-based ratings of hearing aid brands and retailers can help you figure out which products to look for and where you can get them.

HOW WE SURVEY: We surveyed 26,788 CR members about their prescription hearing aids (manufactured in or after 2017) in December 2021–January 2022.\*

We also surveyed the members about various features and how aids performed in different situations. Ratings are based on CR members, who may not be representative of the general U.S. population. The Overall satisfaction score represents overall satisfaction with the hearing aid and is not exclusively determined by factors under the survey results. Differences of less than 2 points are not meaningful.

HOW WE SURVEY: Ratings are based on responses of 9,407 members in a December 2021–January 2022 survey who answered questions about individual retailers.\* Overall satisfaction score represents overall satisfaction with the prescription hearing aid retailer and is not exclusively determined by factors under the survey results. Differences of less than 2 points are not meaningful. We also asked members to rate their overall satisfaction with the shopping experience based on the type of retailer they used. The Veterans Administration and wholesale clubs received top scores from the 24,483 members who responded.

\*The Overall Satisfaction Score for each ratings chart represents overall satisfaction with the aids or retailer, respectively. In both, 100 is the highest possible score, meaning that all respondents were completely satisfied. An 80 means very satisfied and a 60, somewhat satisfied, on average.

## Try This Quick Test

THE HEARING HANDICAP INVENTORY, developed by Barbara Weinstein, PhD, an audiologist who's a professor at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City, helps assess auditory wellness, or the extent to which hearing loss affects people emotionally and socially. One reason it's useful: Someone without measurable hearing loss may still struggle to hear in certain circumstances.

DIRECTIONS: Check yes, sometimes, or no for each question (don't skip any of them), then add up your score. If you score Good or Excellent, you may not need hearing aids. People who score Fair and

have ruled out other possible causes of hearing loss are good candidates for OTC aids. If you scored Poor or Very Poor, it's worth seeking help from a hearing professional.

## SCORING KEY

- 0–6 Good or Excellent
- 8–14 Fair
- 16–40 Poor or Very Poor

## The 4 Types of Hearing Helpers

HEARING AIDS ARE now divided into two key categories: prescription and over the counter. OTCs can be further divided into self-fitting and preset types. You may also come across devices known as personal sound amplification products (PSAPs) and “hearables” in retail stores and online. These aren't considered hearing aids but could be helpful in some instances. Check this chart for the lowdown on each of these kinds of hearing devices.

### OTC Hearing Aid Options

#### Self-Fitting

**WHERE TO BUY THEM** In a retail setting such as a drugstore or electronics store, or online.

**PROS** Currently, self-fitting hearing aids must be cleared as both safe and effective by the Food and Drug Administration. Because they're far more customizable than preset OTC hearing aids, they may suit your specific hearing needs better. Self-fitting aids can be significantly less expensive than prescription hearing aids. (They start at about \$699 per device.)

**CONS** While you'll probably be guided by an app to set up your aids, the self-fitting process might be challenging for some people, particularly those who are less technologically inclined.

#### Preset

**WHERE TO BUY THEM** In a retail setting such as a drugstore or electronics store, or online.

**PROS** With prices starting at about \$199 per device, some of these are less expensive than many of the self-fitting OTC and prescription options. Because these types of aids usually come with just a handful of preset audio programs, they may also be easier to set up than self-fitting OTC hearing aids.

CONS The preset audio programs may not match your hearing loss as closely as a prescription or self-fitting aid will. And these don't need to be cleared by the FDA for efficacy before being sold over the counter, though they must meet standards about minimum technical specs and maximum safe volume.

## Other Options

### Prescription Hearing Aids

WHERE TO BUY THEM From a medical professional such as an audiologist or ENT, or a licensed hearing aid dispenser.

PROS Those professionals vet hearing aids and can help ensure quality and that the aids work properly for you. As part of the purchasing process, you'll also receive a professional hearing test and help selecting a hearing aid. And the hearing care

provider will program your device so it treats your specific hearing problems. Follow-up adjustments are often included.

CONS Price. A pair can cost about \$1,000 to \$6,000 and is usually not covered (or not fully covered) by insurance. In addition, you'll have to go to the provider's office or a retail location for in-person appointments.

### Personal Sound Amplification Products (PSAPs) and Other 'Hearables'

WHERE TO BUY THEM In a retail setting such as a drugstore or electronics store, or online.

PROS Price (PSAPs can be found for less than \$20). Other devices broadly known as "hearables" tend to have many functions, including some hearing-aid-like features. For instance, with Apple's AirPods Pro earbuds, you can listen to music, reduce unwanted background noise, and amplify sounds you want to hear (like a lecture).

CONS PSAPs, which are meant to be used by people without hearing loss in order to amplify sound in situations like bird-watching, aren't hearing aids (and aren't subject to FDA rules about hearing aid safety and quality). Hearables aren't allowed to be marketed for hearing loss.

|   | YES (4 pts.) | SOMETIMES (2 pts.) | NO (0 pts.) |
|---|--------------|--------------------|-------------|
| Does a hearing problem cause you to be embarrassed when meeting new people?                       |              |                    |             |
| Does a hearing problem cause you to feel frustrated when talking to members of your family?       |              |                    |             |
| Do you have difficulty hearing when someone speaks in a whisper?                                  |              |                    |             |
| Do you feel handicapped by a hearing problem?   |              |                    |             |
| Does a hearing problem cause you difficulty when visiting friends, relatives, or neighbors?       |              |                    |             |
| Does a hearing problem cause you to attend religious services less often than you would like?     |              |                    |             |
| Does a hearing problem cause you to have arguments with family members?                           |              |                    |             |
| Does a hearing problem cause you difficulty when listening to TV or radio?                        |              |                    |             |
| Do you feel that any difficulty with your hearing limits or hampers your personal or social life? |              |                    |             |
| Does a hearing problem cause you difficulty when in a restaurant with relatives or friends?       |              |                    |             |

| Brands   | Overall satisfaction score | Battery life | Ease of changing or charging battery | Ease of cleaning | Durability | Reliability | Fit/comfort |
|----------|----------------------------|--------------|--------------------------------------|------------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| Phillips | 75                         |              |                                      |                  |            |             |             |
| Oticon   | 75                         |              |                                      |                  |            |             |             |
| Phonak   | 75                         |              |                                      |                  |            |             |             |
| Rexton   | 73                         |              |                                      |                  |            |             |             |
| Bernafon | 73                         |              |                                      |                  |            |             |             |
| ReSound  | 72                         |              |                                      |                  |            |             |             |
| Widex    | 72                         |              |                                      |                  |            |             |             |

| Brands      | Overall satisfaction score | Battery life | Ease of changing or charging battery | Ease of cleaning | Durability | Reliability | Fit/comfort |
|-------------|----------------------------|--------------|--------------------------------------|------------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| Unitron     | 72                         |              |                                      |                  |            |             |             |
| Audibel     | 71                         |              |                                      |                  |            |             |             |
| Lucid       | 71                         |              |                                      |                  |            |             |             |
| Signia      | 71                         |              |                                      |                  |            |             |             |
| TruHearing  | 71                         |              |                                      |                  |            |             |             |
| Miracle Ear | 70                         |              |                                      |                  |            |             |             |
| Starkey     | 70                         |              |                                      |                  |            |             |             |
| Beltone     | 69                         |              |                                      |                  |            |             |             |

| Retailers                  | Costco Wholesale | Connect Hearing | HearingLife | Sam's Club | TruHearing | Audibel | HearUSA |
|----------------------------|------------------|-----------------|-------------|------------|------------|---------|---------|
| Overall Satisfaction Score | 88               | 78              | 83          | 77         | 81         | 76      | 79      |
| Hearing Aid Options        |                  |                 |             |            |            |         |         |
| Selection                  |                  |                 |             |            |            |         |         |
| Price Transparency         |                  |                 |             |            |            |         |         |
| Price Plan Options         |                  |                 |             |            |            |         |         |
| Evaluation                 |                  |                 |             |            |            |         |         |
| Follow-Up Service          |                  |                 |             |            |            |         |         |

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