

Review: Etymotic Bean is one step from hearing aid

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The loss of hearing can be a touchy subject. Want to find out? Try suggesting a hearing checkup for your mother, father or spouse. If my experience is any indication, you'll probably get ignored, but only after they ask you to repeat what you just said.

Many people are put off by having to make an appointment with a doctor, have their hearing tested, get fitted for hearing aids and actually have to wear them.

Also, hearing aids can cost thousands of dollars.

Today I'm reviewing the Etymotic Bean Quiet Sound Amplifier (\$375 each), which is like a [hearing aid](#), but doesn't require a doctor's visit.

Now before I get any emails or phone calls from audiologists, I'm not saying the Bean is a hearing aid or that people with [hearing loss](#) should use the Bean instead of hearing aids.

I liken the Bean to reading glasses. You might go to the drugstore and get a pair of "cheap readers" before you'd go see the eye doctor.

If people think they might have trouble hearing in certain situations, trying the Bean could be a good first step that doesn't cost too much.

The Beans have been described as helping you hear "one click louder," and it's true.

The Bean looks like what you'd think a hearing amplifier might look like. It's very small and fits inside your ear. It comes with several different types of tips so you can fit it comfortably. It's designed to seal off your ear canal.

The Bean has a small microphone, which listens to what's going on around you, and an amplifier to boost the sound and deliver it to your ear.

It runs on regular No. 10 hearing aid batteries, which last about 10 full days of regular use. There is no on/off switch. When you take the Beans out, you pop open the battery door and the battery swings out of the unit on a little hinge used for inserting or removing it. This is how you turn it on and off.

Once inserted, there is only one switch on the Bean, which controls how much of a decibel boost you're getting.

The low setting is what you'll want to use most of the time. The tiny switch to increase the volume should be used only in situations where you're not surrounded by a lot of noise. Also, flipping that little switch while wearing the Beans is a tad challenging, but not impossible. It helps if you have a fingernail to snag it.

Some people might need to remove the Bean to change the setting.

Speaking of taking them out, the Bean doesn't have any type of handle to grasp when you want to remove it.

I felt a slight panic the first few times I tried to remove the Bean. I learned you need to rotate it a bit to get a better grip on it to pull it out of your ear.

The Bean is called a Quiet Sound Amplifier, which means it amplifies quiet sounds and doesn't amplify louder sounds.

After wearing the Beans for a few days off and on, I came to really appreciate my hearing and to realize it's probably not as good as I think.

When wearing the Bean, I started to notice sounds that my ears either don't hear or tune out.

The drone of a desk fan or the click of a computer mouse from three desks away are suddenly front and center in your head.

Sitting in my quiet living room, I could hear a fan roaring. I got up to investigate and found it was my freezer, which I guess runs all the time but I just ignore it.

Voices are amplified quite nicely; having a conversation with my wife a room away worked well. It certainly helped me hear the radio in my car -

both voices and music.

Where I didn't like it was during quiet times at home or in the car. If there was nothing specific to listen to in a particular situation, the Bean brought out sounds like the heater blower in my car or that dashboard rattle that began to get annoying.

I learned to take out the Bean when I really didn't need it.

My mother-in-law has hearing aids that I wish she wore more often. I wore the Beans at her house last weekend and let her try them out. She also let me try on her hearing aids.

I could see how the Beans do work like hearing aids, but hers certainly sounded a bit different in my ear. They were set to her needs, not mine.

Real hearing aids are tuned by the doctor to enhance the hearing levels you are lacking. They are tuned to your specific hearing situation.

The Bean is simply an amplifier that works on quiet sounds.

In a busy restaurant, they can certainly help you have a conversation across a big table, but having all the voices in the restaurant amplified can be a bit overwhelming.

The Bean did work wonders when I wore it during phone calls.

You can buy and use them singly or in pairs. They ship with batteries and seven different types and sizes of tip.

If you decide they don't really help, you can return them to Etymotic within 30 days for a refund. You can also find them a bit cheaper from Amazon.

ETYMOTIC BEAN QUIET SOUND AMPLIFIER:

-Pros: Makes voices and quiet sounds easier to hear. Inexpensive compared with hearing aids.

-Cons: No on/off switch. Can be hard to remove.

-Bottom Line: Most people I know could benefit from the Bean at some time, whether they realize it or not.

-Price: \$375 each

-On the Web: qsabean.com

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