

Review: Volt over-the-counter hearing aid may help address a silent problem

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Everyone knows someone who seems to need help with their hearing.

Just ask my wife - she and I have a running joke.

I also have relatives on both sides of my family who ought to get their hearing checked, but heaven help you if you bring it up.

I'm not sure why, as a society, we have trouble acknowledging we need help with our hearing.

Think about our eyes. Most of us will need help seeing as we get older, but there sure isn't a stigma about glasses or contact lenses. I know quite a few people who are more than happy to show off their latest frames, but some will raise their voices if you even mention they might benefit from a hearing test.

Perhaps they don't want to deal with another doctor or they've heard from their friends how expensive good hearing aids can be. Maybe their insurance won't cover them.

This week I've been wearing an over-the-counter hearing aid called the Volt from MDHearingAid (\$549 each).

I'm a bit conflicted about making recommendations in the area of health, but I think this is an instance where technology might improve lives with very little chance of doing harm.

So this isn't a review so much as an explanation of a product that may help if you think you have hearing problems but don't want to see a doctor.

How's that for a wishy-washy disclaimer?

Hearing aids have evolved a lot in my lifetime. The earliest I can remember were worn by kids in my elementary school in the mid-1970s, and I recall them looking like a transistor radio worn on the chest, held up by straps, with two wired earpieces.

Today hearing aids come in a variety of types, but the ones I see most often are worn behind the ear with a small transparent tube that loops around the top and into the ear, where there is an open or closed soft ear tip.

The Volt is not visible unless you're looking behind the ear.

I will say it's a bit clunky if you wear glasses because you have to make sure your glasses are on first, then put the Volt on between the glasses and your ear. If you're the kind of person who frequently adjusts or removes your glasses, these types of hearing aids can be annoying.

One great feature of the Volt is a battery that lasts 18 to 22 hours and can recharge with a microUSB cable (included).

Other hearing aids I've tried used those little button batteries.

MDHearingAids sells the Volt alone (specific left or right models) for \$549.99 or a pair for \$1,049.99.

I was sent one for my left ear.

The Volt's behind-the-ear portion is about 1.5 inches long and weighs almost nothing. It really disappears when you're wearing it, and I wore it for hours at a time with ease. I'd have no trouble wearing it all day.

The Volt is a digital hearing aid, meaning the sound is not merely amplified, it's run through one of four digital programs that filter it to highlight specific types of sounds for different situations. There are programs for everyday use, high-frequency or high-volume situations, one-on-one conversation and group conversation with background noise.

You cycle through the programs by pressing a button on the Volt. You'll hear beeps corresponding with the number of the program in use. The Volt does not remember your program choice if you power it off. Each time it is turned on, you start back at Program 1.

Above the program button is a tiny dial to adjust the Volt's volume. Beware that feedback screeching can occur when you adjust the volume too high or place your ear too close to the source of sound.

The charging port is on the bottom of the Volt, and there is a light in the program button that will be blue during charging and turn green when the battery is fully charged.

The light is off when the Volt is in your ear.

If you need more of a boost in sound, the Volt comes with a larger-diameter tube that runs between your ear tip and the Volt called the 13Plus tube. It's easily installed and does make the sound louder overall.

There are also two ear tips, one with an opening to let in outside sounds and one with no opening so it creates a seal. The tips are easy to remove and install.

The Volt does have a 45-day return policy, but only after you've given it a 21-day trial run.

So if you give up after a week and want a refund, you'll get 90 percent back, but if you wait until day 21 and decide the Volt is not right for you, you'll get 100 percent back. There are no refunds after 45 days.

So how well does it work? This is where the review ends and the explanation begins.

I can't tell you. What works for me might not work for you.

I can tell you that it does work and that cycling through the four programs made the world sound distinctly different.

The Volt comes ready to use. Just charge it up, turn it on and put it in your ear.

Everyone should get their hearing checked by a professional. But if you're inclined to try a hearing aid, this is an option that is small and light and does what it says it'll do.

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Volt hearing aid

Pros: Comfortable, available without prescription, can be purchased singly or in pairs. Four distinct sound programs, rechargeable, 45-day trial period.

Cons: Volume wheel is tiny and a bit hard to adjust finely.

Bottom line: If you're ready to try [hearing aids](#), the Volt is a safe choice.

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