

Q&A: Are over-the-counter hearing devices a fit for you?

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I've heard about the new over-the-counter hearing devices, but I'm not sure if they'll work for me. What do I need to know? And what should I consider as I make my decision?

ANSWER: Hearing loss can be a significant quality of life issue for people. There are certainly many benefits to visiting with an audiology practice or specialist. People with moderate hearing loss are good candidates for [hearing aids](#) bought over the counter without medical exams or professional fittings. Think of these devices as you would "cheater" glasses—they fill a need until you're ready for traditional hearing aids.

There are many different types of hearing aids, and it can be challenging to choose the right one. To determine if these devices are a good fit for you, here are some things to consider before you buy.

More convenient and accessible

An over-the-counter option is more convenient and accessible, especially for those who live in areas where making an appointment with a hearing specialist and getting to that appointment can be a barrier to care. Over-the-counter devices are widely available at pharmacies, drug stores, other major retailers and online.

Less expensive

Hearing aids typically are expensive, with prices averaging \$1,000 to more than \$3,000 per ear, or \$2,000 to over \$6,000 per pair, depending

on the level of technology and included services. Insurance coverage for adults can be limited, expensive or nonexistent. With over-the-counter options ranging from \$99 to \$1,700 a pair, these [hearing devices](#) can save many people money.

Quality devices

Some of the developers behind over-the-counter hearing devices are traditional hearing aid manufacturers. In some cases, they're working in partnership with companies known for products with high sound quality, such as wireless headsets. These over-the-counter devices go beyond [noise reduction](#) and sound amplification, and provide a basic level of sound shaping you'd experience with a hearing aid.

Entry-level option

Over-the-counter hearing aids promise to be an excellent first step for people who are just beginning to notice hearing loss. People in the target market tend to be younger—40 to 65 years old, fairly tech-savvy and able to navigate the home-fitting process.

Self-diagnosis

Under the Food and Drug Administration ruling allowing the sale of over-the-counter hearing devices, people need to determine their level of hearing loss. Most manufacturers offer an online or app-based hearing test to help with screening.

But patients may not be the most accurate judge of their condition. Hearing loss varies from person to person. That's why traditional hearing aids are customized—not one-size-fits-all.

How-to instructions

The over-the-counter devices include step-by-step instructions for fitting and use, whether through an app or an online portal. This may include an app-based tuner.

Check with your audiology clinic, which also may offer services for patients who need guidance with fitting and inserting the hearing devices.

Hearing test

Before you dash off to buy an over-the-counter hearing device, you should have an audiologist or hearing professional check your hearing. By having a better idea of your hearing level, you'll eliminate some guesswork in determining which device will be the best fit for you.

Returns, warranties, support

Let's say you do make your choice, but once you begin wearing your new over-the-counter hearing devices, they don't seem right. Most manufacturers offer trial periods and have return policies. They also may provide limited basic warranties. Extended warranties, additional protection, and services such as cleaning and repair are offered for a fee. Some companies provide professional support for a limited time, and once that period expires, the support can be purchased by the hour.

Be sure to read these policies, warranties and support materials carefully so that you know what's covered and what you're buying. For instance, some warranties won't apply to devices with wear and tear, such as those affected by moisture or ear wax.

Quality of life

Hearing loss isn't just an inconvenience. It reduces quality of life because you can't hear what others are saying, which causes you to miss out on conversations with friends and family, as well as important information such as from your health care professional. People with hearing loss begin to feel isolated, which can lead to depression and cognitive decline.

Whether you opt for over-the-counter devices or customized hearing aids after seeing an audiology specialist, what is important is your commitment to improving your hearing level and remaining engaged with those around you.

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