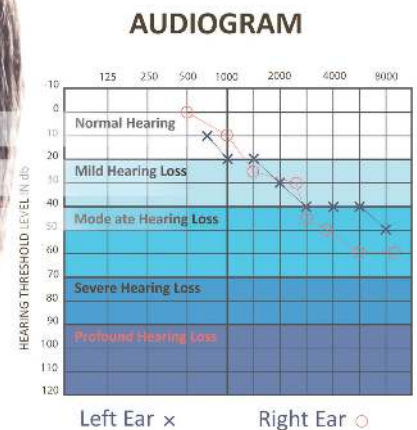


A Guide to Over-the-Counter Hearing Aids

“The leading factor that would influence adults’ purchasing decisions on an OTC hearing aid would be a recommendation from a medical professional: 42% report that this would play the largest role in product selection, with cost being a distant second (18%).”

— Poll conducted in March 2021 by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)



The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has recently released a final rule for a new regulatory class of hearing aids called over-the-counter (OTC) hearing aids. While OTC hearing aids will be widely available beginning later this year at lower costs to many adults with self-perceived mild-to-moderate hearing loss, they are not right for everyone.

Because you have such a vital role in advising your patients regarding their hearing, we wanted to share this important information regarding OTC hearing aids from ASHA and the Academy of Doctors of Audiology (ADA).

Questions and Answers for Clinicians

Who is a good candidate for OTC hearing aids?

OTC hearing aids are appropriate for individuals 18 years old and older with perceived mild-to-moderate hearing loss.

Is there anyone who is NOT a candidate for OTC hearing aids?

- Individuals under 18.
- Individuals whose audiologic evaluations indicate moderately severe, severe or profound hearing loss.
- Individuals with aural drainage, pain in the ears, or a history of ear infections and/or individuals with deformity of one or both ears.
- Individuals with vertigo and/or tinnitus who have not been medically evaluated.
- Individuals with sudden onset of hearing loss.
- Individuals who have unilateral hearing loss that has not been medically evaluated.
- Individuals with tinnitus, especially if pulsatile or in one ear.
- Individuals with limited cognitive function or memory loss/dementia.

These individuals should be referred for audiologic evaluations or to the appropriate medical specialist.

Is a hearing evaluation required before a patient can purchase OTC hearing aids?

While purchasing OTC hearing aids does not require a formal hearing evaluation by an audiologist, professional associations, including the ADA, ASHA and the American Academy of Audiology, recommend that the best outcomes are achieved with a comprehensive audiologic evaluation and rehabilitation program.

Without a formal evaluation, patients are responsible for trying to estimate their level of hearing loss themselves. This can be difficult to do accurately.

Who can help my patient if I’m not sure how severe their hearing loss is?

A doctoral-level audiologist can assess and diagnose a patient’s hearing loss and make appropriate recommendations

for the type of hearing aids necessary to treat the condition in accordance with professional best practices, their lifestyle, and budget. In addition, an audiologist can determine if an individual may need more support for amplification to be successful, such as someone who may need regular cerumen removal or assistance during the acclimatization phase with hearing aids.

Also within the audiologist's scope of practice is aural rehabilitation, tinnitus diagnosis and management, vestibular diagnosis and treatment, hearing protection, and assistive listening devices.

If the audiologist determines that the patient's hearing loss requires further medical attention, a referral to the appropriate medical specialist can be made.

How much do OTC hearing aids cost?

Current estimates are that a pair of OTC hearing aids will cost under \$1,000. These can be good "starter hearing aids" for adults with perceived mild-to-moderate hearing loss.

Prescription hearing aids range greatly in cost, from approximately \$1,500 to \$5,000 per pair. These costs vary based on the level of technology and features included in the hearing aids. Additionally, a patient who works with an audiologist usually has follow-up appointments and routine check-ups scheduled to monitor how well their hearing aids are functioning and for any changes in their hearing.

What is the downside to OTC hearing aids?

OTC hearing aids will be more affordable and potentially more accessible



"OTCs may make hearing aids more accessible, but if a patient doesn't have a diagnostic hearing evaluation, it will be difficult to know what their best option is—OTC or prescription hearing aids."

Tim Steele, Ph.D., CCC-A
President and CEO, Associated Audiologists, Inc.

for patients, but because an audiologic evaluation is not required, there is the potential for over- or under-amplification. The patient also runs the risk that an ear disorder, such as otosclerosis, may go undiagnosed.

OTC hearing aids also have a "one-size-fits-most" design. This means they are "self-fitting," which may be a challenge for some individuals.

In addition, OTC hearing aids come with no follow-up care plan or rehabilitation, and no professional will be monitoring hearing levels over time or troubleshooting these devices. Plus, customization for the patient is very limited.

Summary

Like many other medical conditions, hearing loss is more effectively treated before it becomes a severe problem. Untreated hearing loss has been linked to several comorbidities—increased fall risk, diabetes, loneliness, depression, and cognitive decline or dementia, to name a few.

As a primary care clinician, you can perform an in-office hearing screening if you are comfortable doing so. A failed hearing screening should prompt a

referral to an audiologist for a comprehensive audiological evaluation.

Or, you can refer any patient seeking help for hearing loss—including OTC hearing aids—to an audiologist for a comprehensive hearing evaluation. An audiologist can provide appropriate guidance based on the outcome of the patient's hearing evaluation.

About Associated Audiologists, Inc.

Associated Audiologists is the region's leader in audiological care for hearing loss, tinnitus/sound sensitivity and vestibular disorders. The practice has eight clinics conveniently located in Overland Park, Shawnee Mission, Prairie Village, Leavenworth, Manhattan and Lawrence in Kansas; and Kansas City and Independence in Missouri. Each clinic is staffed by doctoral-level audiologists who utilize state-of-the-art technology to assess and diagnose hearing loss.

References

Adapted from materials compiled by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and the Academy of Doctors of Audiology, July 2022.



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