

ASSOCIATED  
AUDIOLGISTS



# THE LATEST ON OVER-THE-COUNTER (OTC) HEARING AIDS

In August 2022, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued its final ruling creating a new category of over-the-counter hearing aids. The goal of the ruling is to make hearing aids more accessible and affordable. This ruling was set in motion in 2017 when the FDA Reauthorization Act directed the FDA to create the new category, but due to Covid-19 and other complications, it has taken five years for it to become a reality.



## Why introduce a new category of hearing aids?

Only one in four adults who could benefit from hearing aids chose to use them, reportedly due to accessibility and cost. Making hearing aids more affordable is a public health priority, especially as the population ages and the number of people with hearing loss continues to grow. Policymakers believe making hearing aids available over-the-counter can improve access to hearing healthcare for adults.

Though this may be a benefit for many people, there are some important points to be aware of, especially if you already wear hearing aids.

## What are over-the-counter hearing aids?

OTC hearing aids are intended for adults with perceived mild-to-moderate hearing loss. They are an alternative to prescription hearing aids for certain situations. Prescription hearing aids will continue to only be available from hearing healthcare professionals, such as audiologists.

However, adults with perceived mild-to-moderate hearing loss who are age 18 or older can now buy OTC hearing aids directly in stores and online. They are not meant for children or for adults who have severe hearing loss or significant difficulty hearing.

## Who can wear OTC hearing aids?

OTC hearing aids may help those who have a mild-to-moderate hearing loss. Someone with such a loss usually hears fine most of the time, but might have problems in certain challenging listening situations. Often, family and friends will notice an individual's hearing loss first and they might say they have to repeat themselves or that the person is turning the TV volume up too loud. Candidates for OTCs also must be 18 years old or older and be capable of fitting the devices themselves.

## Who should not wear OTC hearing aids?

Those with moderate-to-severe hearing loss, under the age of 18, challenged by learning new things or who have complex health conditions are not candidates for OTC hearing aids.



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## What will OTC hearing aids cost?

Prices will be determined by the manufacturers, but a “best guess” is that OTC hearing aids will run \$800-\$1,200 a pair. In addition, the individual will be responsible for fitting their own hearing aids and servicing them and there is no mandated return policy, so the consumer will need to understand their options before purchasing.

## Who should wear prescription hearing aids?

Individuals who have more severe hearing loss should continue to wear prescription hearing aids that are dispensed and fit by state-licensed, highly trained hearing healthcare professionals, such as audiologists.

These hearing aids are programmed specific to the individual’s hearing loss and provide the higher levels of amplification needed to help someone with a more severe hearing loss. Prescription hearing aids typically include more advanced features such as Bluetooth connectivity and directional microphones.



## What do prescription hearing aids cost?

Prescription hearing aids range in private pay cost, from \$1,500-\$5,400 a pair. These costs vary based on the level of technology; services 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. A return policy is mandated in most states for prescription hearing aids.



## Who can help me pick the right OTC hearing aid?

Many places may offer OTC hearing aids: pharmacies, big-box stores or online providers. Be aware that if you choose to buy OTC hearing aids, you will make the decision about what you buy, just like any other item on the shelf. You may be able to ask store staff for help; however, these staff members likely do not have specialized training in hearing loss and hearing technology programming. It is important to read all information on the box before buying a device. You may not be able to return the hearing aids once you buy them, and remember, they may cost in the \$800-\$1,200 price range.

Audiologists, on the other hand, have a doctoral-level degree with extensive training in the ear, hearing, and balance disorders. They can evaluate your hearing, explain your hearing loss and help you consider the hearing aid that is best for you. Some audiologists will also provide OTC devices they have vetted and may be able to help you with basic maintenance of your OTC hearing aids for a separate service fee.

## Do I need a hearing evaluation for OTC hearing aids?

Technically, a hearing evaluation is not required in order to purchase OTC hearing aids. However, it is strongly recommended. In addition, all professional organizations, including the Academy of Doctors of Audiology, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and the American Academy of Audiologists, recommend a hearing evaluation before purchasing either OTC or prescription hearing aids.

A comprehensive hearing evaluation is the best way to determine the type and degree of hearing loss and can help you determine which type of hearing aid is the best option for you, OTC or prescription. Without a hearing evaluation, it would be difficult for you to know how severe your hearing loss is and what your best options are.

If you purchase OTC hearing aids in a retail store or online, be aware that you will be responsible for fitting the hearing aids and making sure they work correctly yourself. If you purchase prescription hearing aids from a hearing healthcare professional, they will fit and program your hearing aids, and will provide you with the necessary service and support.

<b>Comparison of OTC and Prescription Hearing Aids</b>	
<b>OTC HEARING AIDS</b>	<b>PRESCRIPTION HEARING AIDS</b>
Self-fit	Fit by an audiologist
Price: \$800-\$1,200 a pair or less	Price: \$1,500-\$5,400 a pair
Age: 18+	All ages, including children
Self-diagnosed	Diagnosed by an audiologist
Only for: perceived mild-to-moderate loss	Best for: all types and degrees
Design: one size fits most	Design: custom with discreet options
Return policy: none mandated by FDA	Return policy: mandated in most states
Selection process: self	Selection process: recommendation from audiologist or hearing instrument specialist



## Will I be happy wearing OTC hearing aids?

If you currently wear prescription hearing aids that function well for you, you will probably find OTC hearing aids a step down from what you have. In fact, a recent study showed that “premium” prescription hearing aids have the highest user satisfaction. This preference stemmed from factors related to comfort, how the hearing aids processed background noise and how well the study participants could hear speech in a group setting. Because of the lower cost of the technology to develop these features, self-fit OTC hearing aid satisfaction is yet to be fully studied.

## How long do hearing aids typically last?

The overall life expectancy of hearing aids nationally is around three to four years, especially for hearing aids purchased in big box retail stores. It is anticipated that the life expectancy for OTC hearing aids will be less, but that is not known yet. It is possible that some OTCs will not be repaired but rather replaced with new devices when they are no longer functional.

Prescription hearing aids purchased through Associated Audiologists last on average six to eight years.

## Why should I see an audiologist, even if I want to buy OTC hearing aids?

An audiologist is the best person to assess auditory function, diagnose hearing loss and provide a medical referral when necessary. They can help you understand why you are experiencing difficulty and determine the type of device that would best suit your needs, which may indicate an OTC device. They can monitor your hearing over time to see if it remains stable or worsens. Regular check-ups are important as further decline in hearing may indicate the need for a stronger prescriptive setting. They can also assess if your chosen hearing aid (OTC or prescription) is providing enough amplification to meet your hearing needs, or whether you and your audiologist should discuss other options. The common goal between you as the patient and the audiologist as the provider is to help you create a plan and a path toward improved hearing.

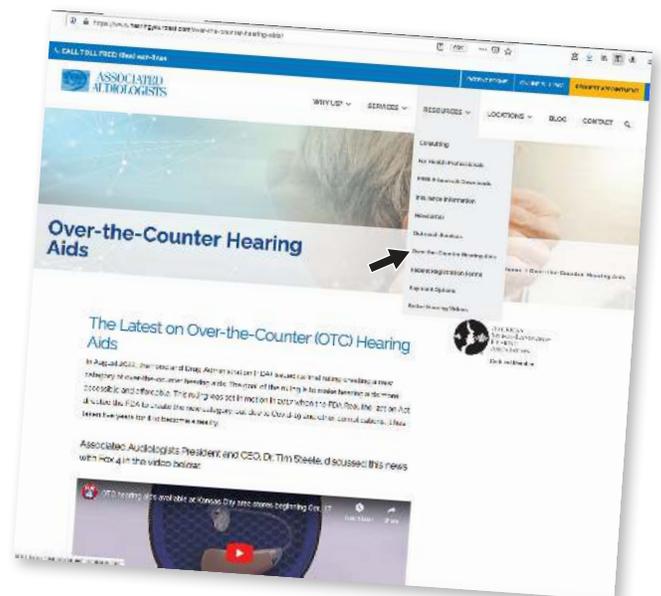
There will be a great deal to learn in the first 6 to 12 months regarding the many OTC options that will likely be available. Associated Audiologists expects more information for consumers in early 2023 after continued due diligence and completion of pilot studies.

An audiologist can discuss the pros and cons of OTC hearing aids with you, and whether you may be a candidate for them.

## Looking for more information?

Visit **hearingyourbest.com** for more information about OTC hearing aids.

To schedule an appointment with one of our doctoral-level audiologists, call **855-547-8745**.



### References

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

# ABOUT US



Associated Audiologists, Inc., is the region's leader in audiologic care for hearing, tinnitus, and balance disorders. Established in 1985, the practice is independent and locally owned by Timothy C. Steele, Ph.D., President and CEO.

Associated Audiologists has grown to include eight convenient locations to serve you in Overland Park, Shawnee Mission, Prairie Village, Lawrence, Leavenworth and Manhattan, Kansas; and in North Kansas City and Independence, Missouri.

The Associated Audiologists team features professionals who use advanced diagnostic and verification technology to evaluate and manage hearing loss. The practice offers digital hearing aid products from the world's most respected manufacturers backed by unparalleled service. We also have experts who specialize in evaluating and managing tinnitus and sound sensitivity, and dizziness and balance disorders.

Each of our associates is a doctoral-level audiologist. As part of their doctoral training, these audiologists spend a final year completing an externship experience supervised by a licensed audiologist. Our audiologists are members of the Academy of Doctors of Audiology (ADA) and hold certificates of clinical competence in audiology from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). Many of our team members are also adjunct professors at the University of Kansas Medical Center.



**HearingYourBest.com**  
**1-855-547-8745**