

ASSOCIATED  
AUDIOLOGISTS



# **SOUND ADVICE ON OVER-THE-COUNTER (OTC) HEARING AIDS**

With the recent entry into the marketplace of over-the-counter (OTC) hearing aids, many consumers are asking themselves, “Which do I need? Self-fitting over-the-counter or custom prescription hearing aids?”



Probably the best place to start to answer that question is with a diagnostic hearing evaluation performed by a doctoral-level audiologist. A hearing evaluation isn't required in order to purchase OTC hearing aids, but without one, how will you know if you actually have a hearing loss or how severe it is? All professional organizations, including the Academy of Doctors of Audiology and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, recommend a diagnostic hearing evaluation before purchasing any kind of hearing aids, OTCs or prescription.

The evaluation the audiologist performs serves as the “blueprint” for your hearing aid prescription, and tells you whether your hearing loss is mild, moderate or severe.

During a diagnostic hearing evaluation, an audiologist examines your outer ear with an otoscope or video otoscope. This helps the audiologist observe any damage caused by the use of cotton applicators (“Q-tips”), trauma, or chronic infection. An audiologist can also observe the condition of the ear drum and determine whether the ear canal may have a build-up of earwax causing a hearing loss.

After considering a patient's history and performing a visual inspection of the outer ear, the audiologist can perform an audiological evaluation composed of a series of tests. These tests may include but are not limited to:

- Tympanometry to assess the status of the middle ear.
- Pure tone thresholds by air conduction and often by bone conduction to determine the degree and type of hearing loss.
- Tests of speech threshold and speech recognition to assess comprehension of complex signals.
- Special tests of auditory function, such as otoacoustic emissions, brainstem auditory evoked response (BAER), or balance testing.

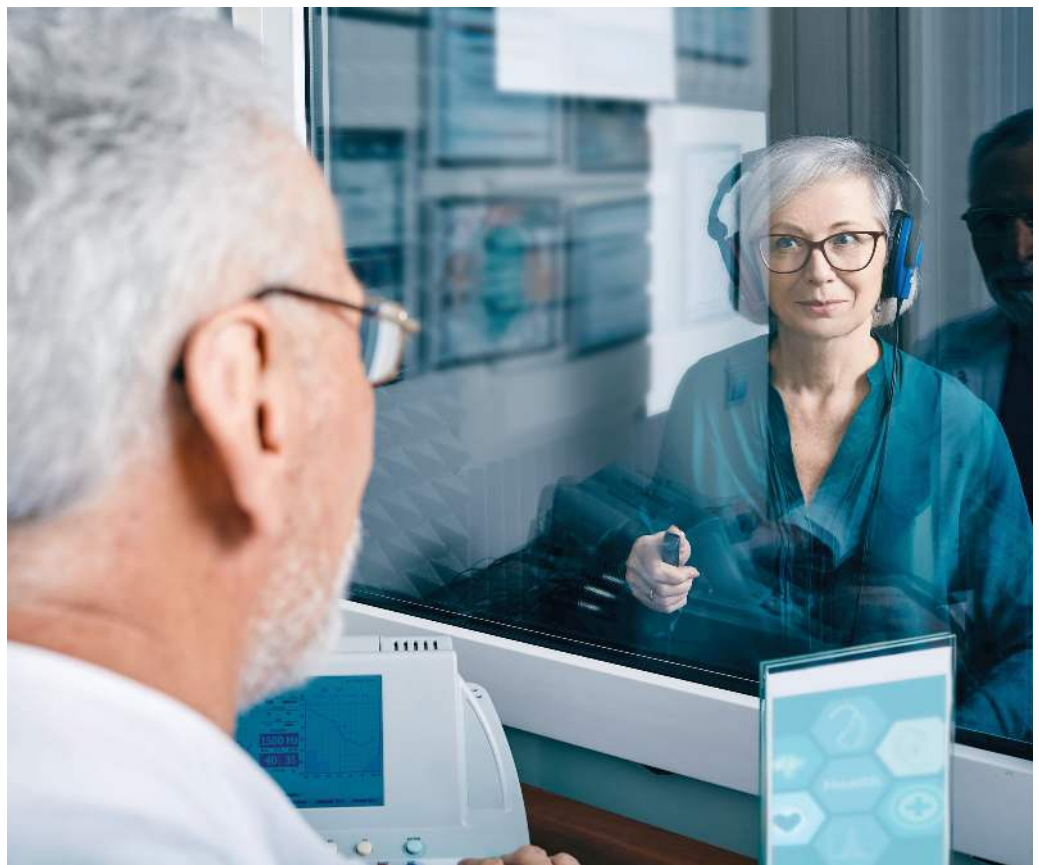
In addition to testing hearing and balance, an audiologist also can:

- Recommend, fit/dispense, service, and adjust hearing aids.
- Recommend and provide assistive listening devices (products to enhance telephone conversations, television viewing, etc.).
- Provide tinnitus assessment and management.
- Provide education regarding the effects of noise on hearing and prevention of hearing loss.
- Deliver counseling and aural rehabilitation (counseling, education, auditory training/exercises).

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*If testing indicates your hearing loss is in the mild-to-moderate range, you may be a candidate for OTC hearing aids. But if your test indicates you have a more severe hearing loss, you'll need the more advanced technology only available in prescription hearing aids.*

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## A checklist to help you determine your hearing treatment solution

### You should have a diagnostic hearing evaluation if:

- ☐ You have a history of or are experiencing ear pain or active drainage or balance problems.
- ☐ You hear much better in one ear than in the other.
- ☐ You suddenly cannot hear out of one or both of your ears.
- ☐ You hear ringing or roaring in one or both of your ears.
- ☐ You struggle to hear in all listening environments, including quiet environments.

*If you answer "yes" to any of the above, you should consult with an audiologist.*

### You could be a candidate for OTC self-fitting hearing aids if:

- ☐ You hear well in quiet environments but struggle in noise.
- ☐ You own a smart phone and feel comfortable downloading a new app.
- ☐ You are a proactive learner with basic knowledge of how to use a smart phone or tablet.
- ☐ You have good cognitive abilities and enjoy teaching yourself new skills.
- ☐ You feel cost is a priority when determining your hearing health care.
- ☐ You are interested in some hearing support, but not willing to commit to the traditional prescription hearing aid process.

*If you answer "yes" to any of the above, you may benefit from OTC hearing aids.*

### You should consult an audiologist if:

- ☐ You want a solution personalized to your unique hearing needs (for example: asymmetrical hearing loss or tinnitus management).
- ☐ You need help to set up and manage self-fitting OTC hearing aids.
- ☐ You have not experienced hearing improvement from self-fitting OTC hearing aids.
- ☐ You would like additional support with maintenance and care of your hearing aids.
- ☐ You have earwax build-up and need regular monitoring and management of cerumen.
- ☐ You have more significant hearing loss.
- ☐ You experience a change in your hearing over time that requires ongoing support.

*If you answer "yes" to any of the above, you should consult an audiologist.*



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

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

However, adults with self-perceived mild-to-moderate hearing loss who are age 18 or older can now buy OTC self-fit 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. Those with mild-to-moderate hearing loss can also benefit from prescription hearing aids even if they are an audiological candidate for OTC devices.

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## Who can wear OTC hearing aids?

OTC self-fit 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 notice an individual's hearing loss first. They might say they have to repeat themselves or that the person is turning the TV volume up too loud. Candidates for self-fit OTCs must be:

- 18 years old or older with perceived mild-to-moderate hearing loss.
- Capable of fitting and programming the devices themselves.

## Who should not wear OTC self-fit hearing aids?



OTC self-fit hearing aids are not for everyone. We do not recommend them for the following:

- Individuals with moderate-to-severe hearing loss.
  - Children or individuals under age 18.
  - Individuals who have difficulty with technology or who are challenged by learning new things and would have a hard time programming their hearing aids themselves, regardless of age or how severe their hearing loss is.
  - Individuals who have not had a diagnostic hearing evaluation to determine their level of hearing loss. Though someone may “perceive” their hearing loss as mild-to-moderate, without adequate testing, it is difficult to know how severe their hearing loss is.
- Individuals who have difficulty with dexterity and may have trouble properly inserting and using OTC self-fit hearing aids.
  - Individuals whose complex medical conditions, including cognitive decline, dementia or Alzheimer’s disease, make them better candidates for the support an audiologist can provide, regardless of age or how severe their hearing loss is.

## What do OTC self-fit hearing aids cost?

Prices are determined by the manufacturers, but currently OTC self-fit hearing aids cost \$800-\$1,600 a pair. In addition, the individual is responsible for fitting, programming and servicing their own hearing aids and there is no mandated return policy, so the consumer needs to understand their options before purchasing.

## Will I be happy wearing OTC self-fit hearing aids?

If you currently wear prescription hearing aids that function well for you, you will probably find OTC self-fit 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 possible lower cost of the technology to develop these features, OTC self-fit hearing aid satisfaction is yet to be fully studied.

# PRESCRIPTION HEARING AIDS

## 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 custom 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, directional microphones and artificial intelligence.

Others who should continue to wear prescription hearing aids include:

- Children and individuals under age 18.
- Individuals who have difficulty with technology or who are challenged by learning new things and would have a hard time programming their hearing aids themselves, regardless of age or how severe their hearing loss is.
- Individuals who have difficulty with dexterity and may have trouble properly inserting and using hearing aids.
- Individuals whose complex medical conditions, including cognitive decline, dementia, or Alzheimer's disease, make them better candidates for the support an audiologist can provide, regardless of how severe their hearing loss is or age.

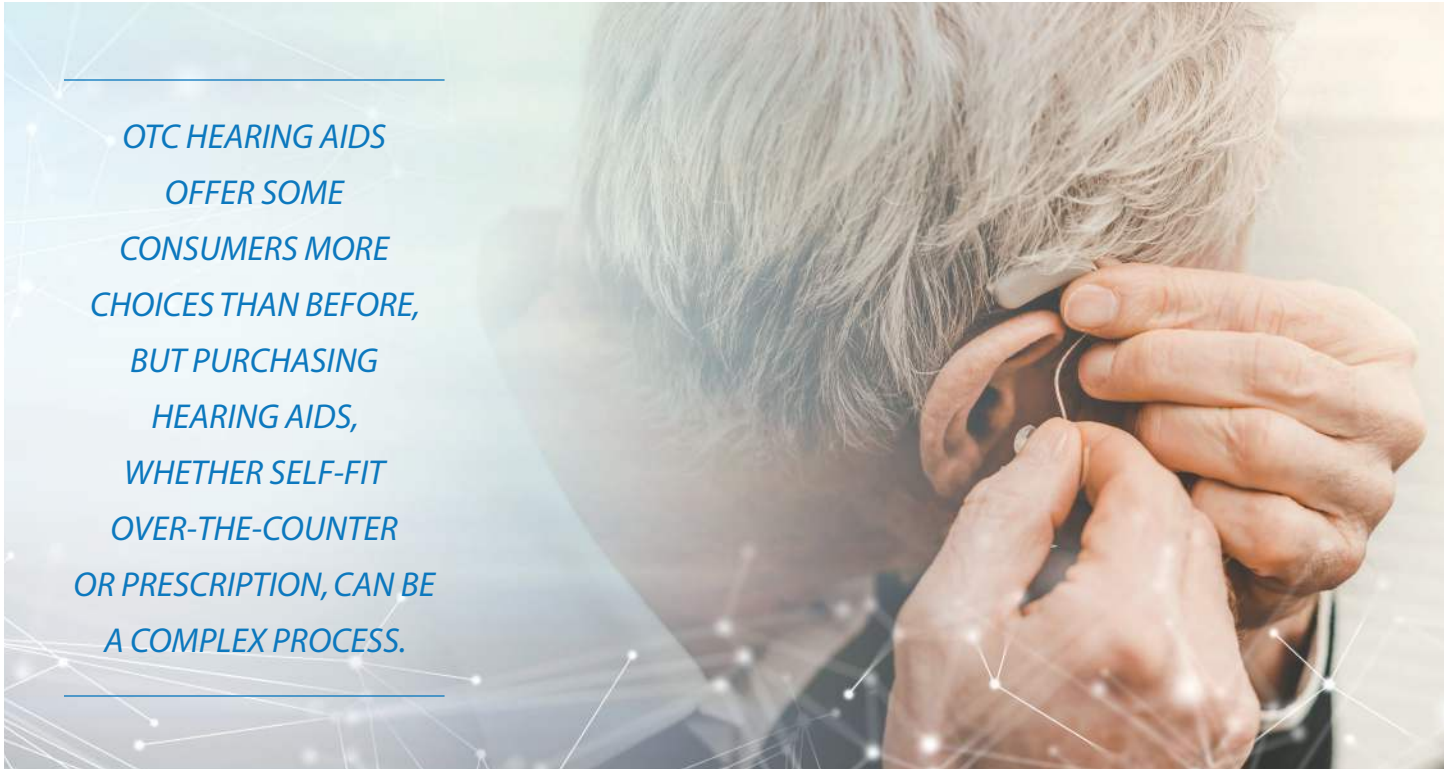


## What do prescription hearing aids cost?

Prescription hearing aids range in cost, from approximately \$1,500-\$5,400 a 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, ongoing maintenance, cerumen management, 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 hearing aids?



Pharmacies, big-box stores or online providers may offer OTC self-fit hearing aids. Be aware that if you choose to buy OTC self-fit hearing aids, you are making 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 aren't inexpensive. They may cost in the \$800-\$1,600 price range for a pair. It would be wise to also understand the product warranties and what they entail.

As a comparison, basic prescription hearing aids may run \$1,500 a pair but can be customized to the individual's hearing loss. Audiologists, who have a doctoral-level degree with extensive training in the ear, hearing, and balance disorders, dispense and fit prescription hearing aids. They have the advanced technology available to determine how well the hearing aids are performing in your ear, and can make appropriate adjustments.

If you aren't sure whether you are a candidate for OTC self-fit or prescription hearing aids, they also can evaluate your hearing, explain your hearing loss and help you consider the hearing aid that is best for you. Some audiologists also provide OTC devices they have researched and may be able to help you with basic maintenance of your OTC hearing aids for a separate service fee.



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

An audiologist is the best professional to assess auditory function, diagnose hearing loss and provide a medical referral when necessary. They can help you understand why you are experiencing difficulty hearing and determine the type of device that would best suit your needs, which may include an OTC device.

An audiologist 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 stronger prescription devices. 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, as well as the ongoing process for hearing rehabilitation.

There is still a great deal to learn regarding OTC options. Associated Audiologists expects more information for consumers after continued due diligence and completion of pilot studies.



## Are there other benefits to wearing hearing aids in general?

Yes. Aside from improved hearing, research has shown that people who wear hearing aids have improved health, including better social engagement with friends and family, lower rates of depression and delayed onset of cognitive decline.



## How long do hearing aids typically last?

The overall life expectancy of prescription 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 self-fit hearing aids will be slightly less, but that is not known yet.

Prescription hearing aids purchased through Associated Audiologists last on average six to eight years. This is likely due to working with reputable manufacturers that provide quality products coupled with the benefits of ongoing maintenance, which help extend the life of the hearing aids.

<b>Difference Between Prescription and OTC Hearing Aids</b>		
	<b>Prescription Hearing Aids</b>	<b>OTC Hearing Aids</b>
<b>Hearing Loss Assessment</b>	Medically diagnosed hearing loss	Self-perceived hearing loss
<b>Hearing Loss</b>	Fits ALL degrees of hearing loss	Self-perceived mild-to-moderate hearing loss
<b>Selection Process</b>	Consultation selection process with professional for best fit	Self-selection based on preference
<b>Cost</b>	Consult with your Hearing Care Professional	\$800-\$1,600
<b>Continued Care</b>	Personalized professional fine-tuning and adjustments per feature and frequency	Customized self-adjusted volume, treble and overall sound quality preferences
<b>Design</b>	Customized and discreet options	Universal ear-tips, sizes (XS-L)
<b>Fitting</b>	Professional personalized fitting	Follow app guidance for devices to be set based on in-app hearing profile check
<b>Features</b>	Unlimited features to maximize hearing success	Limited features and access to adapt the hearing aids per need
<b>Additional Support</b>	Verification and validation for maximum hearing aid success	Access to online support materials, including instructional videos and customer support
<b>Device Maintenance</b>	Professional service, care, and regular maintenance	Self-cleaning and maintenance of device
<b>Return Policy and Warranty</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standard return 30-45 days</li> <li>• Standard warranty 1-3 years, including loss/damage coverage, varies by device</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standard return may vary</li> <li>• Standard warranty 1 year</li> <li>• No loss/damage coverage</li> </ul>



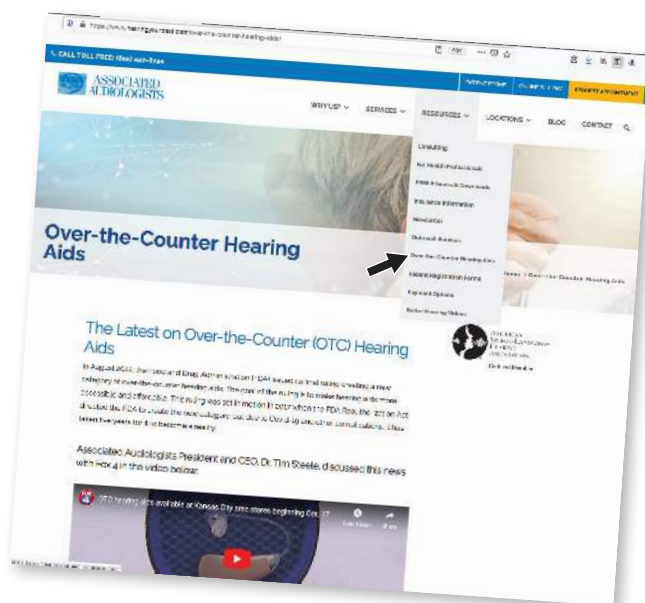


## Looking for more information?

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

Schedule an appointment with a doctoral-level audiologist for a diagnostic hearing evaluation. This information will not only help you determine whether you have a hearing loss, but what your options are.

**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 ASSOCIATED AUDIOLOGISTS, INC.



Associated Audiologists, Inc., is the region's leader in audiologic care for hearing and balance disorders. The practice was established nearly 40 years ago and is owned by Tim Steele, Ph.D., President and CEO.

Today, it has grown to include multiple doctoral-level audiologists and eight convenient locations to serve you. The audiologists have allied health staff privileges at AdventHealth (formerly Shawnee Mission Medical Center), Saint Luke's South, East and North hospitals, specializing in:

- Hearing Diagnostics
- Hearing Aids
- Tinnitus
- Dizziness and Balance Disorders

The Associated Audiologists team uses advanced diagnostic and verification technology to diagnose and treat hearing loss. Associated Audiologists offers digital prescription hearing products from the world's most respected manufacturers backed by unparalleled service.

The practice's audiologists also are leaders in local, regional and national professional audiology associations. All members of the Associated Audiologists team are certified by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and they are frequent presenters at educational conferences.



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