



# 12 Things to Ask Yourself Before You Buy an Over-The-Counter Hearing Aid





## INTRODUCTION

On August 16, 2022, the FDA announced their long awaited over-the-counter hearing aid guidance, which has been years in the making. This guidance was hard to develop, in part because hearing loss is a major medical condition associated with dementia, cognitive decline, falls, tinnitus (ringing in the ears), depression, isolation, and more. The impetus was to give more people access to hearing help, but the danger was that people would miss or ignore important issues with their hearing, that they would overestimate the amplification they needed, potentially further damaging their hearing, or they would underestimate the amplification needed, running the risk of cognitive decline and falls because their brains weren't receiving the needed amount of stimulation.

In the end, the FDA gave revised guidelines for this new classification of hearing aid, but with caveats severely limiting how much sound the hearing aid can produce, how far it can go into the ear, who can use the devices and that they are only to be used for self-perceived mild to moderate hearing loss.

While we applaud the goal of making hearing health care more accessible to more of the 42 million people who suffer from untreated hearing loss, as hearing professionals with over 25 years of experience, we have a few concerns. In the interest of sparking thought and conversation about over-the-counter hearing aids, we invite those considering purchasing them to ask themselves the following questions before making that choice.



01

## HOW WILL I KNOW IF I ACTUALLY NEED A HEARING AID?

The FDA states that over the counter (OTC) devices are meant for consumers with “perceived mild to moderate hearing loss”. In our professional experience, many people who come into our office do so because their family perceives a hearing loss, but the patients themselves have learned to cope with the loss and they are surprised to find their families were correct. Besides this, hearing can be impaired by ear wax build up, by physiological malfunction, and by other medical conditions. Most people would be appalled at the idea of treating their own diabetes, heart disease or blood pressure without seeing a doctor first to determine the cause and degree of the disorder- hearing should be no different.

Furthermore, a simple audiogram or online hearing test is not sufficient to gain the information necessary to treat hearing loss in an optimal fashion. This is why in our clinics, we follow the best practices for medically diagnosing and treating hearing loss.

This evaluation includes:

- Health history to determine genetic propensity for hearing loss as well as comorbidities like diabetes, heart disease, and other contributing factors. Otoloscopic examination to rule out ear wax and broken eardrums
- Tympanometry to determine the functionality of the eardrum, and surrounding hearing organs  
Otoacoustic Emissions to determine the functionality of the inner ear and cochlea
- Pure tone audiometry to allow us to know the degree of your hearing loss by testing the sensitivity of your ears to different sounds.



- Word Recognition to test the cognitive parts of your auditory system and establish your clarity score.
- QuickSIN to measure how much difficulty you have understanding in background noise
- Bone Conduction to verify that the area behind the eardrum is not adding to your hearing loss
- Cognivue to screen for how well your brain is processing information beyond the auditory system.

We do these tests not only at the beginning of the process to see if and what treatment you need, but also periodically across the life of your treatment plan to make sure that your prescription is correct and is meeting your needs. When untreated and undertreated hearing loss has been proven to increase risk of dementia by 200-500% and has been associated with increased risk of falls and social isolation, as well as decreased earning power if you are still in the workplace, do you really want to try to treat your own perceived hearing loss?

Besides these risks, there is also the risk that you may spend \$1000-\$2000 on an over-the-counter device that you don't even need. If your hearing loss is caused simply by wax build up, wouldn't it be better to take care of that simple problem instead of spending money on an unnecessary device? But you won't know unless you have a professional evaluation.

## 02

### HOW WILL I KNOW WHAT IS THE RIGHT HEARING AID FOR ME?

A 2017 study to see how well people did at choosing their own hearing devices found that only 10% of people were satisfied with the first hearing aid they picked- 90% of them tried at least one other device. And, even more frightening, 75% of those people picked the WRONG hearing aid, based on their audiogram. Even after all of that, only 55% of the patients wanted to keep their hearing aids after a month.



All hearing aids are not equal and every hearing aid will not work for every person. Some people need more support in noise, some need better support on the phone, some people want better music quality. Hearing professionals spend years learning about the best way to fit and program devices, as well as many hours in trainings each year to learn about the newest technology. The wise consumer will seek the advice of people who know!



03

## WHO WILL ADJUST MY DEVICES WHEN THEY ARE TOO LOUD OR NOT LOUD ENOUGH?

Like eyesight, hearing changes. The beauty of an ongoing hearing treatment plan is that the hearing technology is adjustable. By doing more testing to see what has changed, a hearing professional can make adjustments in an evidence-based fashion

to make sure you are getting the stimulation you need for clarity and for your brain to stay active.

With over-the-counter devices, your options are very limited and only allow you to use an app on your phone to turn the device up or down. Studies have shown that, when left to their own devices, patients tend to turn devices down more than they should because they are used to the decreased sound level they have experienced for years, and until they adjust, it is simply more comfortable. A hearing care professional is trained on helping you to adjust to the world of better hearing and to ramp up the sound level you receive until you are getting the stimulation you need.

04

## HOW WILL I KNOW IF MY HEARING AIDS ARE GIVING ME THE SOUND I NEED?

One of the most important steps in following the medical model for treating hearing loss is verification. We do this in two ways. The first is that we use Real Ear Measurement after a patient has been wearing the devices for a few weeks and the amplification has been ramped up to the recommended level. We put a small probe in the ear with the hearing device to test that the device is delivering the right amount of sound for that particular person. Because each person's ear canal is different,

it is important to make adjustments to the prescription based on actual evidence, not just a guess. Without Real Ear Measurement, a patient's prescription can be off as much as 20- 30%! You wouldn't want your heart medication or insulin to be off by that much, would you? Verification is the only way to make sure that your prescription is correct.



05

## HOW WILL I KNOW IF MY HEARING AIDS ARE WORKING?

Like every electronic device worn on your body, hearing aids are more subject to breakdowns than say a cell-phone or laptop computer. You may notice that your hearing aids aren't working as well as they used to,

but if you purchased them over-the-counter, you won't know why and the big-box salesman who sells everything from cell phone chargers to video games won't be able to help you.

In our office, we use a Hearing Instrument Test Box (HIT Box) to verify if a device is working properly. When the results come back incorrect, we are able to know if it needs to have a speaker replaced, a microphone cleaned, or if it needs to be sent in to the manufacturer for repair. If none of these things are the problem we know to run tests on the patient to see if there is ear wax or a change in hearing, and then take appropriate action.

06

## WHAT WILL I DO IF MY EARS ARE FULL OF WAX AND IT PLUGS UP MY HEARING AIDS?

Ear wax is a problem for many people and can really be a struggle for hearing aids.

Most over-the-counter devices come with a few changeable filters, but that only solves the problem for as long as it takes for the new filter to become plugged up again.

With a treatment plan from one of our offices, you have access to our state of the art ear wax removal system which will painlessly remove the wax while one of our technicians removes the wax from your hearing device.



07

## WHAT DO I DO IF I SWEAT A LOT OR AM IN A HUMIDITY AND IT CAUSES MY HEARING AIDS TO SHORT OUT?

This is more common than most people want to admit! Electronic devices don't like water or sweat, and no matter how hard the manufacturers try to make them water resistant, they are not waterproof. With over-the-counter devices, you have no recourse. You can try a special dehumidification jar, with varying degrees of success.

In our office, we have a Redux machine which uses vacuum and heat tailored for hearing aids to remove moisture. We have successfully brought back to life devic-

es that have been through the washing machine and in the swimming pool with this machine!

08

## HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM GETTING A GOOD DEAL ON MY HEARING AIDS?

The first thing to consider when asking this question is "would I want a 'good deal' on my cancer treatment or my insulin?" The old adage that you get what you pay for is especially true in this case.

A better question would be "How can I make treating my hearing loss affordable?" One of the saddest things we see (and anticipate even more with the over-the-counter option) is when a patient spends hard-earned money on cheap devices that aren't right for them, and then they have to spend more money to come into a professional's office to get the correct treatment.

We get it-- we know that it is difficult to come up with thousands of dollars to treat hearing loss. We applaud those who know how important it is to make this investment for their health and relationships. We have worked hard to make our treatment plan affordable-- by offering a monthly payment option.

It comes down to what the term "affordable" means to you. If the absolute lowest price is your only concern, and you don't care about on-going care, then over-the-counter might be a good option for you.



## The Professional Hearing Care Hearing & Tinnitus Treatment Plan Includes:

- Medical quality testing following the industry best practices
- Prescription and fitting of high-end hearing technology
- Verification that the devices are adjusted for YOUR individual needs All supplies and accessories you need to hear your best
- A full-coverage warranty for the life of the treatment plan (if it isn't working, we will fix it and you will never pay anything extra)
- A one-time loss or damage replacement coverage
- Ongoing office visits all included Membership in our VIP club which gives you access to our education and patient appreciation events
- And best of all- a locked-in monthly price for as long as you are our patient. Talk about beating inflation! You will never pay a penny more for your monthly treatment plan than you pay today.

But if you want great care at a low monthly price, then our treatment plan is the most affordable option you will find.



## WHAT DO I DO IF I BUY A HEARING AID AND THEN CHANGE MY MIND?

Currently, the FDA has no requirement for a return policy for hearing aids purchased over-the-counter. This is something our

professionals have vigorously opposed because currently most states mandate at least a 30 day right to return.

In our office, we are so confident that we can help you to meet your treatment goals, we double what is mandated and offer a 60 day return policy, as well as a 100% satisfaction guarantee- we won't stop working with you until you are hearing better. If that means we have to switch your technology a year into your treatment, we do it. We have less than a 5% return rate: less than a fourth of the national average!



## 10

### WHAT IF I HAVE TINNITUS?

The FDA specifically names tinnitus (or ringing, buzzing or whooshing in the ears) as a condition that should be treated by a professional, and not with over-the-counter hearing aids. Because tinnitus is caused by hearing loss in over 90% of patients, finding a hearing care provider who specializes in tinnitus is vital for successful treatment.

Each of our providers is a Certified Tinnitus Provider through the Excellence in Audiology group, and we have developed our own proprietary approach for treating tinnitus which includes hearing technology as well as an online counseling program.

This program, called My Tinnitus Therapy isn't available anywhere but Timpanogos Hearing & Tinnitus and is included in your treatment if needed.

## 11

### WILL MY OVER-THE-COUNTER HEARING AID WORK WITH MY BLUE-TOOTH DEVICE?

Every over the counter device is going to be different. We assume that some will have Bluetooth capabilities, but as of right now, that is unknown.

What we DO know from our experience with hearing devices and Bluetooth technology is that often when the phone has an update to the operating system, the hearing devices need to have a firmware update in order to function properly.

On the good side of that coin is that occasionally when new features become available on a phone, sometimes that leads to increased functionality in the hearing devices- but this also requires a firmware update. This takes just a few minutes in



the hearing clinic, but if you purchase your devices over the counter, it is unclear if and how you will be able to get those updates.

12

## WHO WILL HELP ME TO ADJUST TO THE WORLD OF BETTER HEARING?

While we'd like to say that the process of hearing better is as simple as wearing hearing technology, unfortunately, it's not quite that easy. That's not to say that hearing better is difficult or painful— it is just more of a process than a quick-fix. Unfortunately, the longer the person has waited to treat their hearing loss, the more bad communication habits they and their loved

ones have developed, such as not listening in noisy situations, avoiding restaurants, asking “what?” even when they can hear, etc. It takes counseling, communication and practice to truly re-enter the world of hearing again.

In our practice, we have written a short guide for making this transition easier for all involved and integrated it with a 20 week email and video series with tips and hints for taking care of your devices and for hearing better in restaurants, on the phone, in church, and in meetings and events. Our patients and their families have found this help crucial to making the adjustment to hearing better.

Unfortunately, there is no such help available when you buy an over the counter hearing aid.



## CONCLUSION

We are thrilled that the FDA ruling has brought hearing health care into the spotlight, as there are 42 million people living with untreated hearing loss. Our mission at Timpanogos Hearing & Tinnitus is to help as many of those 42 million people as possible to improve their cognitive function, their relationships, and their overall quality of health and life by providing expert, compassionate, affordable care.

We want people to maintain their independence and be able to stay in their homes, living healthy and active lives by decreasing their risk of falls, dementia and social isolation. We believe these outcomes are most likely achieved by creating a strong provider/patient relationship based on expertise, commitment and genuine concern for each other's well being.

## NOTES

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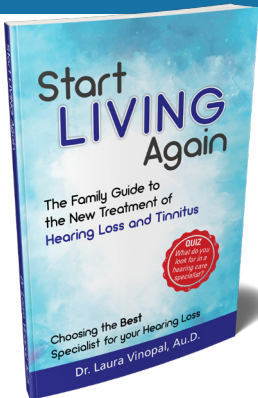
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