



The newsletter of the Hearing Loss Association of America, Albuquerque Chapter

WIRED FOR SOUND

OTC Hearing Aids—a Primer

Katherine Bouton

How much do over-the-counter hearing aids cost — \$99 or \$1,995?

Are they for you? And how well do they work?

Over-the-Counter hearing aids were approved in 2022, but many buyers are still confused. So was I. That's why I'm sharing what I found out.

The market for hearing aids is huge, and navigating the hearing-health care system requires ingenuity and patience, not to mention often-exorbitant amounts of money. Almost 30 million Americans of all ages would benefit from hearing aids, according to the National Institutes of Health, including a disproportionate number of those over 70. Among septuagenarians, 55 per cent of those 75 and older would benefit from hearing aids, but only one in three has even tried them.

Under-use of hearing aids has many causes, including cost, difficulty of access to audiologists and stigma. Over-The-Counter (OTC) hearing aids—hearing aids you buy and adjust without an audiologist's input—were approved for sale by the Food and Drug Administration in 2022. Hearing-health advocates hoped that with cheaper, more accessible hearing aids, the barriers of cost and access would disappear, and as more people wore hearing aids, stigma would drop away. But the expected revolution in hearing-health care is arriving more slowly than some expected.

OTC aids will not replace prescription hearing aids or the need for audiologists, and they are not for everyone. Candidates for OTCs are adults with self-perceived mild to moderate hearing loss. They are *not* for:

- people with more than a moderate loss
- children under 18



- people with any pain or discomfort in the ear, dizziness, sudden hearing loss, loss in only one ear, ringing or buzzing in the ear

These latter conditions are considered red flags, and you should not try an OTC aid without seeing a doctor.

Upsides and Downsides

One factor delaying the revolution is that three years after FDA approval, quality OTC's are sometimes as expensive as a prescription hearing aid. Those that are inexpensive are not always safe, with no cap on volume control (even though volume control is an FDA requirement), and they don't work as well as the more expensive products.

The OTC market is big and confusing, and getting bigger. As of last fall, there were at least 40 companies selling OTC devices and 80 more had filed applications for approval, according to Thomas Powers, whose eponymous consulting firm works with the hearing-health industry.

The new OTC hearing aids muddy the waters rather than clearing them. How do you choose from what looks like a vast number of offerings? This is hard with prescription aids as well, but you usually have a hearing professional as a guide (for better or sometimes for worse).

An audiologist can help with choosing an OTC aid, but it's hard to find an audiologist, let alone one who will help you with an OTC hearing aid. Nearly two-thirds of U.S. counties lack audiology

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15 Feb Meeting 10:00 AM To Noon—**on Zoom****Lipreading/Speechreading**

Please join us to hear Suzanne Johnson share with us more details on learning lipreading/speechreading. Some of the program will cover the different stages of learning, so even mild to moderate proficiency can be helpful. Any amount of speech/lipreading can be a good tool in our toolkit to improve communication. Resources for learning on our own will be shared as well!

Suzanne Johnston, MA, CCC/SLP is a speech/language pathologist who has worked in the Rochester, NY community with deaf/HOH persons for over 30 years. She manages a busy private speech pathology practice in Brighton, NY. Suzanne has twice served as the President for the local HLAA chapter, and on the Board of Directors since 2012.



She served as the speech pathology liaison for the Cochlear Implant Team at a local hospital, where she honed her skills in teaching lip/speechreading assessment and treatment. Suzanne has served on local and national councils and as an expert witness in legal cases, representing the needs of persons who are deaf or HOH. In her private practice, Suzanne currently actively works with individuals with hearing loss, using her skills in Auditory Processing and Lip/Speechreading to assist them in maximizing their comprehension skills. She has the lived experience of the everyday challenges of hearing/listening with her own, single-sided, deafness.

The HLAA ABQ Chapter could use some help to resume hybrid meetings (for example, with hospitality), as well as some new blood. You already know our dedication to providing the best information, advocacy, education and support for people with hearing loss. You can ease your way into volunteering and learn how this works. Just email one of the board members (listed on the left). You may also use the chapter email: HLAAbq@gmail.com.

services, according to a December 2024 report, disproportionately affecting rural communities.

As of January 2025, Medicare disallowed coverage for telehealth visits with audiologists, making access to an audiologist harder. You *should* have an audiologist test your hearing, but if you can't, take an online or telephone test, and try one of the new hearing aids. The [CEDRA](#)¹ (Consumer Ear Disease Risk Assessment) screening test is also a way to see if OTC aids are right for you.

Choices

One of the most popular OTC hearing aids on the market is the [Jabra Enhance Select](#)², which remains at the top of most lists of best OTC hearing aids. Michelle Holcomb, a 50-something Boston fundraiser for small nonprofits, was one of the early users of the Jabra. She bought hers in 2022, online, after taking Jabra's online hearing test. (She had seen a doctor a few years before, who ruled out any serious issues.)

With a few modifications and one or two follow-ups, they have worked well for her. Holcomb uses hers primarily for work or in noisy group settings. She paid around \$1,300 for the pair. The newer top-of-the-line Jabra Enhance Select retails for \$1,995 and includes three years of hearing care, warranty, and loss and damage protection.

[Hearing Tracker](#)³ and its testing partner [Hear Advisor](#)⁴ are the source that most people look to for information about hearing-aid quality. Hearing

Tracker put the Jabra, at \$1,995, in the top spot on its [2025](#) best list⁵, which included nine OTC aids with costs ranging from \$1,995 down to \$99.

The Jabra list price is \$1,795-\$1,995. The higher-price premium includes three years of hearing care, warranty, and loss and damage protection.

Basic Vs. Premium

Hearing Tracker advises: "Whichever Jabra Enhance product you pick, we highly recommend opting for the premium package (\$1,995 versus the basic package at \$1,795). The custom programming to your unique hearing profile and the three years of professional hearing care—which includes

unlimited remote adjustments—can make all the difference. You'll also receive three years of warranty and loss & damage protection, instead of just one year."

Almost all hearing aids, prescription or OTC, come in a range of prices. The more you pay, in general,

the more you get.

The [Audicus Omni](#)⁶ Series 2, at \$1,898, came in second on Hearing Tracker's list. Third overall was the [Lexie B2Plus Powered by Bose](#)⁷ at \$999. The [Sony CRE 10](#)⁸, #4, is \$1,299 and others are \$999 or below. The recently issued [Apple AirPods Pro 2](#)⁹ is \$249. The least expensive, the [JLab Hear OTC](#)¹⁰, at \$99, is understandably pretty basic, but Hearing Tracker gave it a B for sound quality (with the caveat that "most devices in this price range are



The Jabra Enhance Select

¹ <https://sites.northwestern.edu/cedra/>

² Search for "Jabra Enhance hearing aids"

³ <https://www.hearingtracker.com/>

⁴ <https://www.hearadvisor.com/>

⁵ <https://www.hearingtracker.com/otc-hearing-aids>

⁶ hearbetterwithhearingloss.wordpress.com

⁷ Search for "Lexie P2Plus powered by Bose"

⁸ <https://www.hearingtracker.com/hearing-aids/sony-cre-e10>

⁹ Search for "Apple AirPods Pro 2"

¹⁰ <https://www.jlab.com/products/hear-otc-hearing-aid-graphite>

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The HLAAAbq NPO number for Smith's is **NC419**.

awful”.) The [Elehear Beyond](#)¹¹ hearing aid was cited as the “Best Budget Under \$400” hearing aid and received an A Sound Grade from the Hear Advisor lab.

Most of these OTC aids include noise cancellation, directional hearing and other features found on expensive prescription aids. A self-hearing test is usually included and helps in programming the aid. If you have an audiogram from an audiologist you can scan that information in. The prices will vary according to where you buy them and what grade package you choose.

Features differ as well. Some have rechargeable batteries, and some use the one-time-use batteries that conventional hearing aids usually use. (I use regular hearing aid batteries, and they last about a week with full-time use.) Some of the hearing aids on Hearing Tracker’s list do better in the speech-in-noise area and others do better for music and other audio streaming. For details among Hearing Tracker’s top nine, [this link](#)¹² takes you to full descriptions of each.

The announcement of [Apple's new hearing system](#),¹³ in September, generated a lot of media interest, despite the fact that the software was not yet available. If you already owned the AirPods you’d just need to download the new free software. If you bought a new AirPods Pro 2 with the hearing aid software installed, the list price was \$249. Apple’s standard 14-day return policy applied. (This is a short return window for hearing aids, which take time to get used to. Most return policies are 30 to 45 days.)

When the software became available a couple of months later, it arrived without much fanfare. I couldn’t find anyone who has used them, and I can’t try them out myself, because my hearing loss is severe to profound.

One friend tried to connect via her existing AirPods but she didn’t have a new enough iPhone. You need iOS 18.1 or higher, and she didn’t want to buy a new phone. Hearing Tracker published [a detailed review](#)¹⁴ of the Apple in November, updated in January, with tepid findings in all but the audio streaming category.

Deterrents

Stigma is perhaps the biggest deterrent to buying and wearing hearing aids. The stigma of hearing aids is entangled with the stigma of age, reinforced by the fact that the elderly are more likely to have hearing aids than younger people. Their hearing loss might have started when they were younger, but the combination of delay in getting hearing aids and the fact that most hearing loss is progressive means that we see more older people with hearing aids.

If enough people start wearing hearing aids because of OTC availability, and if enough of them are young (attracted by the Apple option, for instance), will stigma begin to drop away? Abram Bailey, AuD., the founder and president of Hearing Tracker, notes that denial also plays a major role—“My hearing isn’t bad enough” or “hearing aids won’t help.”

This is where AirPods could play a crucial role, despite their less than stellar ratings. They are accessible and inexpensive, and Apple is a trusted name. AirPods give people an easy way to see if amplification helps.

Yearly dues are \$15 per household.
They are due in January.

¹¹ <https://www.hearadvisor.com/products/elehear-beyond>

¹² <https://www.hearingtracker.com/otc-hearing-aids>

¹³ Search “Apple AirPods Pro 2” and click on “Hearing Health” link

¹⁴ <https://www.hearingtracker.com/hearing-aids/airpods-pro-2>

Traditional Hearing Aids and Some Buying Alternatives

Traditional prescription hearing aids go for \$7,000 and more per pair, often with little to no insurance coverage. Medicare does not cover hearing aids, though some Medicare Advantage plans do. But there are good alternatives.

[Costco](#) offers brand-name prescription hearing aids at a big discount, often around the same price as the better OTCs. It also sells OTCs. Costco has its own audiologists and hearing-aid specialists, so the audiologist shortage is not an issue.

Users I spoke to are happy with the experience, buying name brand aids like Oticon and Phonak at

a big discount. If you are a veteran, hearing aids are free through the Veterans Administration, which is the country's largest supplier of hearing aids. Costco is second.

It's still early days for over-the-counter hearing aids. The revolution may not be coming as quickly as hoped, but most think we are off to a good start.

This article was first published in [ClearHealthCosts.com](#).

See Katherine's Blog @ <https://katherinebouton.me/>.

See her books [Shouting Won't Help and Smart Hearing](#) on Amazon.

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Help When You Need It

Stephen O. Frazier

The availability of hearing loops is expanding at an ever-increasing speed both in the US and abroad, but there are times and places where they are impractical. That doesn't mean hearing help is not available, but it means people with hearing loss need to speak up and let their needs be known. WiFi technology is often available to provide the communication access those people need.

The use of WiFi as a means of communication access is increasing exponentially—usually with good results. Though plagued with sometimes objectionable latency, it allows hearing people in the back of the group, and hard of hearing people anywhere in the group, to hear and understand the person speaking at conventions and other gatherings where even those with good hearing sometimes have difficulty hearing. Following are examples of some of the uses of this technology:

- 1. Sports Bars and Gyms:** These venues use it so patrons can watch and hear the TV with the game or event that interests them. The ADA mandates do not apply to settings like these, so patrons download the appropriate app and they use their cellular phone as a receiver for the WiFi signal. They review the available channels on that app and then set it for the sound channel offering the play-by-play they wish to hear. Their smartphones stream the sound to Bluetooth-capable earbuds or hearing aids.
- 2. Museums and Art Galleries:** An example is the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City which has integrated audio WiFi systems to provide detailed descriptions of artworks and exhibits to visitors with hearing loss. The British Museum in London utilizes audio WiFi technology to offer narrated guides for its diverse collections, ensuring an inclusive experience for all patrons. In these instances, each “station” on the tour has a pre-recorded description of the items

on display and that description can, because of the multi-channel capability of WiFi systems, be offered in a variety of languages.

3. **Tour buses and excursion trains:** The North Shore Scenic Railroad in Duluth, MN, the Skagway Street Car in Alaska, and the tour buses at the New York Botanical Gardens are examples where the WiFi technology is successfully used. The venue can make special WiFi receivers and earphones or earbuds available to the travelers, or, to save them the trouble of returning the devices at the tour's conclusion, tourists can download the appropriate app and use their smartphones as their receivers.
4. **Public transportation hubs:** Grand Central Terminal in New York City utilizes audio WiFi systems to broadcast announcements regarding train schedules and platform changes, ensuring individuals with hearing loss and other passengers receive essential travel information. Heathrow Airport in London employs audio WiFi technology to provide important announcements and flight information to all passengers, including those with hearing impairments.
5. **Commuter trains:** In the UK, a new onboard digital service has been tried providing hard of

hearing and other passengers with personalized journey information in both audible and readable formats. Called the Hearing Enhanced Audio Relay (HEAR), it enables passengers connected to the onboard Wi-Fi to receive journey announcements on their smart devices in real time, specifically tailored to each passengers' preferences—for example only informing them of announcements relating to their destination or including other information.

6. **Convention centers:** Santa Fe, NM, and Philadelphia are just two examples where such venues' public address systems have been supplemented with WiFi Audio. This simple “fix” meets both ADA requirements and the needs of people with impaired hearing. Latency (delay) makes listening and understanding what's being said somewhat difficult, but for those able to turn off the mics in their hearing aids, the slight delay is better than not being able to hear and understand the speaker.

In settings like these, receivers with earphones or neckloops are often available, or users can utilize their smartphone as a receiver. Connecting the smartphone to Bluetooth, telecoils or earbuds can also ensure reduced background noise interference.

Loop People, Loop Places

Ginevra Ralph

Rhodes Scholars, but Few Telecoils

Forty-five Road (not Rhodes) Scholars¹⁵ from all over the country have come to The Shedd in Eugene, OR, for a full week of concerts, films, classes, lectures and presentations. Twelve of them let us know in advance that they use hearing aids, and we immediately sent them information about the hearing loops in all of their classrooms and

concert halls. We included the important HLLA document that Juliette Sterkens created, saying “just give this to your hearing specialist” to be sure that you have a telecoil and know how to use it. Maybe four of these guests are hearing all the wonderful sounds—the others still don't understand their hearing aids or assistive listening systems. It's disheartening today, but they will go home tomorrow with ammunition. For this month, maybe I should change the title of this column to Loop Places, Loop People!

Please note our mailing address is
P.O. Box 36792, Albuquerque, NM

¹⁵ <https://www.roadscholar.org/>

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