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SAVVY SENIOR

Best over-the-counter hearing aids for older adults

Dear Savvy Senior, Can you recommend some good over-the-counter hearing aids for seniors on a budget? I'm not sure what to get or where to buy them.

Hard of Hearing

Dear Hard,

The new FDA approved over-the-counter (OTC) hearing aids that hit the market last October have become a very attractive alternative to millions of older Americans with hearing impairment.

These new hearing aids can be purchased at pharmacies, consumer electronics stores or online without a hearing exam, prescription, or appointment with an audiologist. And the savings are significant. The average cost of an OTC hearing aid is about \$1,600 per pair, which is about \$3,000 less than the average price of a prescription hearing aid.

But sorting through all the different options and styles can be confusing. Here are some tips along with a reliable resource that can help you choose the right aid for you.

Check your hearing

Your first step to getting a hearing aid is to get your hearing tested. Be aware that OTC hearing aids are designed only for people with mild to moderate hearing loss; signs include trouble hearing speech in noisy places, in groups and during phone calls.

The best place to get your hearing tested is through a hearing care provider like an audiologist. These in-person tests are usually covered by private medical insurance, and as of this year, Medicare will pay for general hearing evaluations without a doctor's referral.

You can also assess your hearing at home with a good app-based hearing test like Mimi (mimi.health) or SonicCloud (soniccloud.com).

If you find through your test that you have severe hearing loss (signs include being unable to hear spoken words even in a quiet room or trouble hearing loud music or power tools) then OTC aids aren't the right solution for you. You'll probably need a prescription hearing aid, which you must get through an audiologist or hearing instrument specialist.

Choosing an OTC aid

If you decide that an OTC hearing aid may work for you, here are a couple pointers to help you choose.

First, you need to know that OTC hearing aids come in two types: self-fitting and preset. Self-fitting aids typically use a smartphone app to setup and adjust the device to suit your specific hearing needs, which makes them better suited for seniors who are technologically inclined. While preset hearing aids are much simpler devices that come with a number of set programs for different levels of hearing loss, and the controls are directly on the hearing aid.

Also, because OTC hearing aids have a learning curve, it's very important to know the level of customer support you'll have access to. So, before you buy, find out how long the company provides support after your purchase, and what sorts of experts will be providing the support.

You also need to find out about the company's return policy. It can take weeks to get accustomed to wearing hearing aids and figure out whether they're really working for you or not. So, make

sure to choose a brand that offers a minimum 30-day free trial period, or money back return policy.

Best OTC hearing aids

To help you cut through all the different options, the National Council on Aging (NCOA), which is a national nonprofit organization that advocates for older Americans, recently assembled a review team who collectively spent more than 5,000 hours researching, testing and interviewing customers about OTC hearing aids.

They came up with a list of nine winners based on such criteria as affordability, style and fit. Their best OTC hearing aids for 2023 in their nine categories include:

Best for Seniors: Jabra Enhance (jabraenhance.com)

Best Invisible Fit: Eargo (eargo.com)

Most User-Friendly: Lexie (lexiehearing.com)

Most Affordable: Audien (audienhearing.com)

Most Financing Options: Audicus (audicus.com)

Best Remote Customer Service: MDHearing (mdhearingaid.com)

Best Rechargeable for the Money: Go Hearing (gohearing.com)

Best Variety: Lucid (lucidhearing.com)

Best Earbud-Style: Sony (electronics.sony.com)

To learn more, see NCOA.org/adviser/hearing-aids/best-otc-hearing-aids.

Send your senior questions to: Savvy Senior, P.O. Box 5443, Norman, OK 73070, or visit SavvySenior.org. Jim Miller is a contributor to the NBC Today show and author of "The Savvy Senior" book.

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