

OVER-THE-COUNTER HEARING AIDS MAY COST YOU MORE

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There has been a huge push recently to provide cheaper hearing aids. Most of these options are mail order and come as a one-size-fits-all approach. The problem is, so many factors are involved, and they're too diverse for this mail order, over-the-counter (OTC) approach to work.

Severity of hearing loss, how long the person has let the hearing loss go untreated, and their ability to process language all require examination and counseling from a professional.

As an audiologist, I believe that the industry certainly needs to make hearing aids more affordable. But these alternatives may do more harm than good.

Most people don't realize that wearing inappropriate hearing aids or not wearing hearing aids at all actually has long-term implications on balance, memory, and the ability to understand conversation.

It is imperative to have an audiologist or hearing instrument specialist work with the patient to provide routine follow-up care and counseling on proper use.

First, the hearing system needs to be evaluated fully by an Audiologist. A patient could have an occlusion in the ear (wax or foreign body) that needs to be removed, or they could show signs of infection or even tumors in the canal. Audiologists also evaluate middle ear function to see if there is a need for medical or surgical evaluation.

Then they test the severity and type of hearing loss as well as word recognition ability (how your brain is processing language). Sometimes a referral is needed for medical clearance or surgical treatment by an otolaryngologist or ENT.

The OTC and mail order approach may put an individual at risk for treating a hearing loss that needed to have medical intervention.

Most mail order options are not cheap, and many are not capable of providing the amplification needed to treat certain hearing losses. This can mean trying many devices to find something that works.

Audiologists and hearing instrument specialists cannot program these OTC devices, so if you or your loved one needs help after purchasing these de-



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vices, we will not be able to make necessary changes.

Remember, with hearing aids, louder does not mean clarity. In fact, in some cases, individuals can be over-amplified to the point of distortion of speech. Most of these devices need to be sent back to the supplier for fine tuning. These changes are very simplistic and are reminiscent of the old basic trim pot hearing aids, where we could only make simple changes and hope it helped.

Most important, these OTC and mail order approaches may lead to frustration and giving up. If people prolong treating hearing loss with hearing aids, this can lead to significant decrease in the ability to process language. Untreated hearing loss is linked to dementia, depression, social isolation and balance problems.

Helping your loved one hear the best they can is a team approach. Audiologists see their patients anywhere from three to 10 times a year. Some patients benefit from fewer visits while others need additional support due to memory or vision deficits (poor vision is sometimes makes it harder to keep devices clean and in working order). A hearing aid that is clogged with wax or an ear canal blocked with wax are essentially a plug blocking the sound from the hearing aid.

Take the time to educate yourself on the options. Our office offers a free screening and consultation, so come and let us educate you on how we can help your family treat hearing loss.



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