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OTC Hearing Aids – Why No Telecoils?

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By Stephen O. Frazier

For a significant portion of the hearing aid wearing public, the introduction of over-the-counter hearing aids became a non-event. Why – because none of the devices being stocked by the Walmarts and Walgreens of the world contained what is, to those hearing aid users, a “must have” feature – *telecoils*.

Telecoils are the antennas that receive the sound transmitted by an electromagnetic field created by a hearing loop in a theatre, place of worship or other, as the ADA terms them, “place of assembly.”

Hearing loop/telecoil systems are the only assistive listening technology currently available that will connect wirelessly and directly to hearing aids, negating the nuisance of borrowing a receiver or some other device to make a connection.

The telecoil in a hearing aids connects to the loop’s signal by the simple touch of a button. If kept in the mic/telecoil position it connects simply by entering a “looped” room.

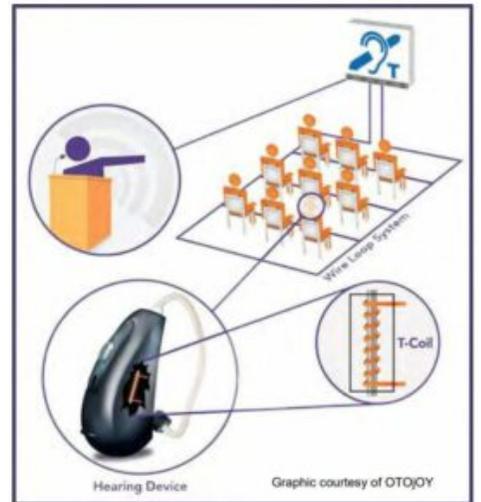


Image credit: OTOjOY
(<https://www.otojoy.com/>)

Hearing Device Users Want Telecoils

Most hearing aids and cochlear implant processors have (or can be ordered with) telecoils and a survey done by the Committee for Communication Access in New Mexico found that 85% of experienced hearing aid wearers had and regularly used telecoils in their hearing aids.

The Hearing Loss Association of America, in a survey, had similar findings. Hearing loops and telecoils are, by far, the preferred assistive listening technology of fabled “educated consumers” and their absence can kill the sale of hearing aids to those consumers.

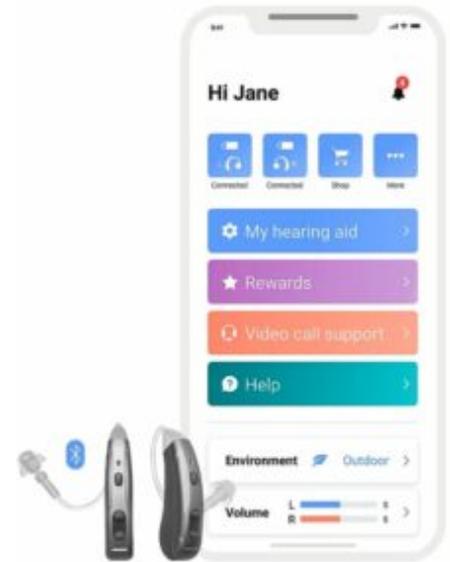
When the Food and Drug Administration sought comments on the proposed rules for a new class of medical grade hearing aids that could be sold over the counter, a substantial number of those comments called for the inclusion of telecoils in all OTC devices. Those businesses making (or considering to make) OTC hearing aids had to be aware of those comments if they were reviewing them for guidance as to the attributes people want to have available in their hearing aids. They also had to be aware of the ongoing hearing loop/telecoil awareness and advocacy campaigns in the nation that have fostered the looping of literally tens of thousands of theaters, places of worship, legislative chambers, meeting halls, convention centers and other places of assembly plus probably an even larger number of home TV rooms.

“ *If they were intent on providing the most functionality for the fewest bucks, they would have included telecoils in their behind-the-ear devices.* ”

Did those manufacturers listen and learn? Apparently not. Two sellers of such devices, Otofonix and MD Hearing Aid, had made one model each of their hearing aids (sold online at the time) with telecoils but they discontinued them.

Lexie Hearing, another online seller of medical grade hearing aids, offered them in one model but, when it came time to sell them over the counter in retail stores

(<https://hearinghealthmatters.org/blog/2022/walgreens-lexie-lumen-otc-hearing-aids/>), those stores opted not to carry that model – the Lexie Lumen – but, instead, to offer it only online. The product buyers for those stores had also apparently not studied the comments to the FDA by prospective OTC buyers.



Lexie Lumen

Telecoils relegated to prescription devices only?

Eighty percent of people with hearing loss qualify for OTC hearing aids but for those who insist on having telecoils in them, they're still relegated to the mercies or benefits of licensed hearing care providers.

In light of the \$3,000 top end currently charged for OTC hearing aids in stores like Best Buy (<https://hearinghealthmatters.org/blog/2022/best-buy-expands-otc-hearing-aids/>), the \$1,399 price for their Kirkland brand (<https://hearinghealthmatters.org/blog/2021/costco-kirkland-signature-10-0-hearing-aids-released-for-sale/>) telecoil equipped behind the ear hearing aids appears to position Costco as the potential first choice for hearing aid buyers

(<https://hearinghealthmatters.org/blog/2017/costco-hearing-aid-review-phonak-resound-bernafon-rexton/>) who insist on telecoils at a price that won't break the bank. That they get the services of a live, licensed hearing care provider, Bluetooth®



Will access to tcoils in hearing aids remain something only available in prescription devices?

connectivity and other bells and whistles such as optional remote controls, remote mics (<https://hearinghealthmatters.org/thisweek/2022/remote-microphone-roger-hearing-aid-cochlear-implant/>) and a TV listening kit is just frosting on the cake.

From the size of their operations nationwide, Miracle Ear and Beltone are two large chain hearing aid retailers who might also consider following the Costco example if OTC hearing aids begin eating into their business. Beltone already put their toe in the OTC budget priced hearing help water by announcing that they will stock and sell the \$800.00 Jabra Enhance Plus OTC hearing aids (<https://hearinghealthmatters.org/blog/2022/jabra-enhance-plus-earbuds-now-available-over-the-counter/>) at participating Beltone locations nationwide and online with no appointment necessary. That, however, does not resolve the conundrum of wider telecoil availability.

About the Author

Stephen O. Frazier is a freelance writer and the former New Mexico HLAA Chapter Coordinator. He was trained by HLAA as a hearing loss support specialist, maintains the Loop New Mexico initiative, co-chairs the Committee for Communication Access in New Mexico, and was one of the founding members of the national HLAA Get in the Hearing Loop Task Force. His articles have run in many publications including the audio/visual magazine *Sound & Communications*, *Advance for Audiologists*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Church Executive*, *Hearing Review*, *Hearing Health* and many others. Those articles can be read at www.sofnabq.com



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