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It's Mid-October, Where Are We With OTC Hearing Aids?

By Stephen O. Frazier

When the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) released their rules for over-the-counter (OTC) hearing aids in August 2022, they set the date for their introduction to be October 17. This week a new era in hearing help is opening for the [roughly 30 million American adults](#) with mild to moderate hearing loss.

Depending on age and gender, between [70 and 84 percent](#) of hard of hearing people in the U.S. who could benefit from hearing aids do not use them. A [majority of that group](#) fall into the category that would qualify for OTC hearing aids, so the market for these products is huge. For those who choose them, OTC hearing aids are going to dramatically reduce the cost of addressing hearing loss.

Justin Golub, M.D., an ear specialist at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City, was [quoted on CBS News](#) as expecting OTC hearing aids to retail for \$200 to \$800 a pair. Others, like Barbara Kelley, the executive director of the Hearing Loss Association of America [quoted in The New York Times](#), have made similar projections. But the higher end may be in the thousands of dollars, as big box electronics retailer Best Buy reports in the same Times article that it will be selling OTC devices for up to \$3,000 a pair.

The Players So Far

A mix of startups, major tech companies, big box stores, and existing hearing aid makers are [jumping into the OTC market](#). Dr. Golub predicted that names like Samsung and Apple may join established online names like Audicus, MDHearing, and Otophonix. [Sony has partnered](#) with WS Audiology (makers of Widex, Signia, and Rexton hearing aids), and has [just announced](#) two different in-the-canal hearing aid models that will retail for under \$1,000. Bose, famed for headphones and speakers, developed an OTC hearing aid now being [marketed by Lexie](#), an established low price hearing aid maker.

Victra, an independent operator of 1,600 Verizon cellular phone stores, has entered into a [partnership with Eargo](#) to stock and sell their smartphone controlled, in-the-canal hearing aids and will even offer an in-store hearing test. In a surprise announcement, Starkey, the only major U.S. hearing aid manufacturer, [announced](#) in mid-October that it will make and market an OTC hearing aid branded Start Hearing One.

Last September 2021, Best Buy [added a “hearing solutions” section to their website](#) with an online hearing test from HearX. The hearing solutions department will now also appear in some of their stores. They are planning to sell up to nine different devices ranging in price from a few hundred dollars to \$3,000 for a pair, including Lexie Hearing, Nuheara, Jabra Enhance Plus, Lucid Hearing, Eargo 6, and more.

Selling Features

In light of the upper end prices planned by Best Buy, it's expected that some of the products will include many, if not all, of the bells and whistles of prescription devices such as customizable sound, multiple sound-environment settings called “memories,” rechargability, and directional microphones.

Adjustability with a smartphone app and even telecoils will be available in the [Lexie Lumen](#) that will be sold at [Walgreens](#). Lexie will also be available at Best Buy, although it's not yet clear if it will be the Lumen model or their B1 model.

The New York Times's Wirecutter, on the heels of the FDA announcement, presented a [comprehensive review of the OTCs then available](#) in late August, and had this to say about telecoils in OTC devices:

“We were unable to find a device available by remote purchase that also offered [telecoil capabilities](#). (Telecoil, t-coil, or induction loop systems essentially offer a means for hearing aids to receive a signal from a local broadcasting device, such as a theater's audio, a [public-transit PA system](#), or a specially equipped telephone.) Hearing assistance also has some technological limitations—like the fact that the smaller the device is, the tougher it is to maintain Bluetooth connectivity. As a result, we realized we had to search for several devices that fit different needs.”

The Role of Pharmacists

Lucas Berenbrok, a pharmacy professor at the University of Pittsburgh Health Sciences, wrote in [The Conversation](#): “Pharmacists will play a key role in OTC hearing aid sales.” This was also echoed in a [recently published University of Maryland paper](#). In recognition of this, ASHA (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association) has developed a special [certificate course](#) for pharmacists.

It will teach pharmacists to:

- Recognize the signs and symptoms of hearing loss.
- Assess the individual's need for over-the-counter hearing aids.
- Assist patients in the selection of over-the-counter hearing devices.
- Collaborate with hearing healthcare professionals to champion hearing health-care.
- Employ effective strategies when communicating with persons with hearing loss.

What Can We Expect About Pricing?

