

“What Do Over-The-Counter (OTC) Hearing Aids Mean?”

Many in the Alport syndrome community may have become aware that as of October 2022, the FDA approved the sales of over-the-counter (OTC) hearing aids. As an audiologist, and an individual living with Alport syndrome related hearing loss, I would like to help put this information in context so our community can better understand how this might impact our choices and options for hearing devices.

Basically, an OTC hearing aid is a device that can now be purchased at a retail store, such as Walmart, Walgreens, CVS, etc. With these devices, there's no requirement to see an audiologist for a hearing exam, and they are designed to help people ages 18+ with mild to moderate hearing loss.

There are two types of over-the-counter devices: 1) Hearing aids that patients control without support, or 2) Self-fitting aids, which an audiologist could adjust remotely.

What is the big reason for this major change in the industry? The FDA approved this to make hearing aids more affordable.

What are the positives about OTC hearing aids?

1. More affordable than traditional hearing aids. (Whether or not that will be the case only time will tell).
2. More big-name companies are getting into the market including Sony and Bose. This could challenge the hearing aid manufacturers to reduce the price and be more creative with the technology.
3. It may lead to better support/accessibility to technology in remote geographic areas.
4. It could lead to reducing the stigma of hearing loss and gain more awareness of hearing loss.

Would I recommend getting your hearing aids today at a retail store? At this time, no. While there are benefits to OTC hearing devices for some individuals and types of hearing loss, a motto of “buyer beware” is necessary as OTC devices cannot replace a formal hearing evaluation and full unit customization. In the future these lower-cost devices will likely improve but only time will tell. Those affected by Alport syndrome should not gamble with low-cost hearing aids as higher quality and customizable devices catered to your unique needs (in ongoing consultation with an audiologist) will ultimately provide the best improvement in audio clarity (not just increased volume) and quality of life.

Thank you,

Dr. Todd Landsberg, AuD