Insights
Notable news and smart solutions

No More Suffering in Silence?

Hearing loss is a widespread problem associated with depression and perhaps even dementia. We report on affordable solutions and what’s being done to give everyone access to treatment.

by Julia Calderone

*Source: Archives of Internal Medicine, Nov. 14, 2011.*
Some advocacy groups say that hearing aids are more expensive than they should be and that cost is an obstacle to treatment.

5 Ways to Save Money on Prescription Hearing Aids

1. Investigate your coverage. Veterans Affairs offers hearing aids for veterans, and some children, federal workers, and residents of Arkansas, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island can get them covered by insurance. Some plans, including almost half of those from Medicare Advantage, offer at least partial coverage or discounts. If you have health savings or flexible spending account, you can use it to pay for hearing aids and batteries with pretax dollars.

2. Shop around. Costco, which was highly rated for customer satisfaction in our survey (see below), offers no-cost screenings at some stores and hearing aids for about $500 to $1,500 each. Buying aids online rather than from hearing aids than others. You can have two people with identical audiograms who have very different functionality,” says Vittorio Taci, a professor of otolaryngology at the Duke University Medical Center, referring to a commonly used hearing test.

In many cases, people don’t think their hearing loss is severe enough to warrant treatment or they simply don’t want to wear aids. There’s another problem: Hearing aids are still sometimes viewed as a sign of faltering health. “There’s much more of a stigma about wearing a hearing aid than there is for glasses,” says James C. Denneny III, M.D., CEO of the American Academy of Otolaryngology—Head and Neck Surgery.

5. Check out groups that can help. Some government, state, and independent organizations, such as Lions clubs, may help you pay for hearing aids or offer discounts. (Go to asha.org and search for “funding.”)
are more expensive than they should be. The PCAST report cites a 2000 study that found that the cost of hearing aid components could be purchased for less than $100. But many of the professionals who sell hearing aids, most of whom are audiologists with doctoral degrees, note that the price also covers many services. Todd Ricketts, Ph.D., director of graduate studies in hearing and speech sciences at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center, explains that evaluating people and then selecting, fitting, and adjusting hearing aids to ensure that they work as well as possible is exacting and time consuming.

But “bundling” the price of the product and services together makes it more difficult for people to know exactly what they’re paying for. According to the NAS report, this lack of transparency also forces consumers to pay for services they may not need.

What’s more, neither Medicare nor a majority of commercial insurance plans—which often follow Medicare’s lead—cover the cost. Nor do they offer coverage for an additional lead—cover the cost. Nor do they offer coverage for an additional device to improve impaired hearing. The National Academy of Sciences and the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology have both recently said that PSAPs can help some people with mild to moderate hearing impairment. But the National Academy of Sciences and the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology have both recently said that PSAPs can help some people with mild to moderate hearing impairment. Both groups are calling for the FDA to allow PSAPs to be marketed as a way to address hearing loss.

To find out whether these hearing-aid look-alikes can help people, we asked three CR employees who were diagnosed with mild to moderate hearing impairment to test the devices. They were paid for their time and expenses. Our panelists were able to adjust the settings for conversations in the noisy environment.

WHAT WE LIKED

Panels found the Etymotic Bean easy to use and inconspicuous, most reported that it improved their ability to hear a TV. Our expert liked the fact that it requires no initial adjustments, is ready to use right out of the box, and—unlike less expensive devices—protects against overamplification of loud sounds, which could damage hearing.

WHAT WE DIDN’T LIKE

Panels found that the Etymotic Bean doesn’t significantly help wearers deciper conversations in the noisy environment. Our expert noted that the device is not significantly helpful and that the device doesn’t amplify sounds in the lower pitches, such as vowel sounds like the letter “o” in the word “pot.”

OUR DEVICE ADVICE

The CS50+ could be of use to people with early or mild to moderate hearing loss. The customizable settings and smartphone connectivity mean the device can potentially work as well as a simple hearing aid for some people, though only if fits and settings are adjusted correctly. The device protects your ears by limiting overamplification of sharp, hearing-damaging sounds, such as a wailing fire engine, though not as much as the Bean (below).

PERSONAL SOUND amplification products are much cheaper than hearing aids. But do they work? We tested a handful to find out.

Are OTC Hearing Helpers Any Good?

Personal sound amplification products are much cheaper than hearing aids. But do they work? We tested a handful to find out.

PSAPs can be used in three to seven days to improve hearing.

WHAT WE LIKED

Panels found it comfortable and easy to use; two out of three felt it improved their ability to hear a TV and conversations. Our expert noted that it’s the only PSAP we tested that allows users to tweak settings to amplify sounds in the frequencies where they have the most trouble—hence, a better-tailored product.

WHAT WE DIDN’T LIKE

Panels found that the device significantly helped wearers decipher conversations in the noisy environment we created in our lab. One panelist thought it minimally improved hearing but found it difficult to stream music. Our expert noted that none of the three panels were able to adjust the customizable settings to optimally compensate for their hearing loss.

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recently announced that it would no longer enforce the medical exam or waiver requirement.

**Affordable Over-the-Counter Solutions**

Given the high cost of hearing aids, it’s no surprise that we’re seeing a growing array of less expensive OTC products, such as wireless headphones for TV watching and phone apps that amplify sound. But PSAPs, which range from about $10 to $500 each, are the most common OTC option.

They sit in or behind the ear and have some of the same components as hearing aids: a microphone, an amplifier, and a receiver. In theory, they should boost the volume of the sounds you have trouble hearing. Some may reduce background noise, as many prescription aids do.

Most PSAPs are fairly basic, offering few or no adjustments for varied environments—say, outdoor spaces or movie theaters. And unlike a majority of hearing aids, PSAPs are generally analog, not digital, so they’re usually less able to reduce annoying feedback and to consistently target only the frequencies in which users really need amplification. “That’s a big difference,” says Cavitt, who co-authored a 2016 study comparing PSAPs with hearing aids. “When the sound comes in, does it merely amplify it, or can it also suppress feedback or extraneous noise?”

These differences may be challenging for consumers to discern. PSAPs aren’t regulated by the FDA as hearing aids are, and manufacturers aren’t permitted to call them hearing aids or claim that they improve impaired hearing. (In fact, according to the FDA, the devices aren’t meant to compensate for hearing loss but are “intended for non-hearing-impaired consumers to amplify sounds in certain environments.”)

And because PSAPs are so loosely regulated, their manufacturers aren’t held to the same safety or efficacy standards as hearing-aid manufacturers. “Consumers have no way of knowing whether one PSAP is better manufactured than another,” says Neil DiSarno, Ph.D., chief staff officer for audiology at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA).

Experts agree that people who already have moderate to severe hearing loss won’t benefit from PSAPs. To see how well they work for those with mild to moderate hearing loss, Consumer Reports had three volunteers who fit that definition test four devices. (See “Are OTC Hearing Helpers Any Good?” on page 18.) We found that the higher-end PSAPs helped some of our volunteers hear better, especially while watching TV.

Ricketts urges consumers to see a hearing professional to determine their level of hearing loss and which frequency ranges need amplification most. (A hearing specialist can also diagnose more easily remedied conditions such as earwax buildup or more serious problems such as ear canal tumors.) A majority of audiologists don’t sell PSAPs or adjust those that consumers buy on their own, although this might soon be changing. “Even if PSAPs are not perfect,” Denny says, “they may give people a relatively simple entry point into the healthcare system at a markedly reduced cost.”

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**FOOD PROCESSORS**
The main processing blade—used for cutting, chopping, and dicing—on about 8 million Cuisinart food processors has been recalled because it can crack and break over time. There have been 69 reports from consumers who found small metal pieces from a cracked blade in their food; in 30 cases, they suffered cuts to the mouth or tooth injuries. The processors were sold online and at stores from July 1996 through December 2015.

**What to do** Stop using the blade immediately and contact Cuisinart at 877-339-2534 or go to cuisinart.com to get a free replacement blade. You can still use the processor with its other attachments.

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**SMOKE/CO ALARMS**
Kidde is recalling about 3.6 million NightHawk combination smoke/CO alarms. Once the backup batteries are replaced, the units can fail to chirp when they reach their seven-year end of life, which may lead users to think they’re still working. That means that consumers may have no alert during a fire or CO incident. The alarms were sold online and at electrical distributors and home centers nationwide from June 2004 through December 2010.

**What to do** Replace the alarm. Contact Kidde at 855-239-0490 or go to kidde.com for a free replacement alarm or a discount on a new one.

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**DEHUMIDIFIERS**
The manufacturers Gree and Midea are recalling about 5.9 million dehumidifiers because they can overheat, smoke, and catch fire, posing serious fire and burn hazards. Midea is recalling 51 brands sold at stores nationwide from January 2003 through December 2013. Gree is recalling 13 brands sold online and at stores from January 2005 through August 2013.

**What to do** Stop using the appliance. Go to midea.com/us/ or greedehumidifierrecall.com for details on affected brands and model names. Call Gree at 866-853-2802 for a full refund or Midea at 800-600-3055 for a replacement or partial refund.