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Testing, Testing...Can You Hear Better Now?

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To many people, hearing loss represents another step in the dreaded march to old age. In fact, only about 20% of the 36 million Americans who could benefit from a hearing aid actually use one, according to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Diseases.

Now, a wave of new devices that are smaller, hipper and sold over-the-counter are trying to win over more consumers—and appeal to the growing number of younger people with hearing damage from loud music.

One upcoming model is a smartphone app. Others look like MP3 players or Bluetooth headsets. Some can barely be seen at all.

They're also less expensive: Traditional hearing aids can cost more than $4,000 per ear and aren't covered by Medicare or most insurers.

Often likened to "reading glasses" for the ears, many of the new models come preset to boost sounds in the high frequencies that most people lose first. That lets consumers bypass audiologists, who have traditionally controlled the market by giving hearing tests and selling custom-programmed hearing aids.

Technically, many of the new devices are "personal sound amplification products," or PSAPs, intended to help people with normal hearing better hear in situations like noisy restaurants and large gatherings, according to Food and Drug Administration guidelines issued in 2009. Hearing aids, by contrast, are medical devices for the hearing-impaired and subject to FDA approval, the agency says.

But the distinctions are blurring, with some PSAPs boasting the same technology that digital hearing aids offer for hundreds, not thousands, of dollars. Meanwhile, online retailers such as America Hears Inc. and Audicus are selling custom-programmed hearing aids at steep discounts direct to consumers when they send in their hearing-test results.

Audiologists warn that consumers who skip the professional exam could damage their hearing further with PSAPs. They also may miss finding a treatable cause for their hearing problems, from excess earwax to an auditory tumor. But industry observers say the new versions could get more consumers to at least consider getting help.

"If friends and family are bugging you because you ask them to repeat themselves too often, and if you can't hear the TV without turning it up, a PSAP is a great way to address the problem initially," says David Copithorne, a marketing executive who writes the influential blog, HearingMojo.com. "You can buy a PSAP over the Internet, stick it in your ear, and see if it helps. For a lot of people it will."

Hearing Aids get Hipper, Cheaper, Smaller

Like millions of others, I have mild hearing loss but am not ready for a hearing aid. So I've been trying some of these alternatives. Here's what I found:

The most impressive new PSAP is the Able PlanetPersonal Sound AMP 2500, which debuts this week at AblePlanet.com. It is the size of a Cheerio and sits in the ear where it is virtually invisible. The company, known for its noise-canceling headphones, put the same Linx Audio technology into each tiny earpiece to reduce background noise while it amplifies frequencies that carry speech.

"It's like having the smallest noise-canceling headphone in the world," says Able Planet Chairman and CEO Kevin Semcken. There is no volume control, but as the sound environment changes—say, the restaurant gets noisier—you can discreetly switch among four built-in programs by cupping your hand over your ear and tapping.

While trying the Able Planet in both ears for the past few weeks I said "What?" and "Huh?" much less often—to my family's delight. I didn't need to crank up the TV and even at a deafening pro football game, I could hear conversations easily. No one noticed I was wearing them.

The sound quality is as good as high-end hearing aids I've tried with less background noise and at a fraction of the price—$499 for one and $899 for the pair.

The Symphonix, made by RCA, looks like a small behind-the-ear hearing aid. A clear plastic tube links it to a tiny plastic dome that fits inside the ear canal. The earpiece has an on-off switch, a three-stage volume control and uses a rechargeable battery. It costs $299 at Radio Shack and other retailers, and you can adjust it to fit in the right

or left ear. I tried it at the football game, at a party and while watching TV and it definitely amplified speech. But it also amplified many distracting background sounds as well. I sometimes heard feedback when I moved my head, but wiggling the dome deeper into my ear canal helped.

The MDHearingAid also sits behind the ear with a plastic dome in the ear canal. It is an FDA-approved hearing aid, but it is sold online and preprogrammed for typical mild to moderate hearing loss. "Hearing loss is a medical condition, but we don't want people going without help," says Sreekant Cherukuri, the Chicago otolaryngologist who designed it for patients who couldn't afford high-end hearing aids. The "Pro" model I tried felt more substantial than the Symphonix, was easier to adjust and had less feedback. It cost $180 for one; $329 for a pair.

Amps for the Ears

1. The Silver Sonic XL from Bell + Howell simply amplifies sounds up to 90 feet away for $19.99 per ear. **2.** The RCA Symphonix uses digital technology to distinguish speech from background noise and has a rechargeable battery for $299 per ear. **3.** The Panasonic JX is an FDA-approved hearing aid that looks like an MP3 player and works with headphones; it's designed for people who have trouble dealing with tiny hearing-aid buttons and batteries, about $1,000. **4.** The MDHearingAid Pro is a preprogrammed hearing aid designed by a physician; it comes with a variety of dome sizes. $180 per ear; $330 for a pair. **5.** The Able Planet Personal Sound Amp 2500 is about the size of a Cheerio, is virtually invisible in the ear and has four programs users can change by tapping on their ear. It's $499 per ear; $899 for a pair.

Walker's Game Ear makes a variety of PSAPs for hunters who want to amplify the sound of prey in the woods, but need protection from loud noises like shotgun fire. The bass and treble can be adjusted for other tough hearing environments, like factories or lectures. I tried the behind-the-ear $209 Elite HD Pro at the office and on Manhattan sidewalks. Voices came in great, but so did passing sirens. (Mercifully, there was no gunfire.)

Later this year, Soundfest, a Needham, Mass., start-up, plans to offer a downloadable app called Real Clarity that will turn an iPhone or Android smartphone into a hearing-assistance device. The phone's built-in microphone will pick up sounds, the app will process the signals and send the enhanced sound through the user'searphones. The app, which will be priced at $10 to $20, will store a user's individual hearing profile, but it can be modified for different situations. "Our theory is that people know what they can and can't hear, and they can adjust it themselves," says Soundfest CEO David Duehren. A version planned for next year will work with a Bluetooth wireless receiver for $179.

The Panasonic JZ looks like an MP3 player with headphones, but it is designed for elderly people and others who would have trouble manipulating tiny hearing-aid batteries and buttons. Dials on the 2-by-2 inch device let users control volume and switch among four programs—from "standard" to "party"—displayed on an LCD screen. A true FDA-approved hearing aid, the JZ is individually programmed and sold through audiologists, for about $1,000.

A wide range of older, analog devices are available online for well under $100. Most simply boost all nearby sounds indiscriminately without enhancing speech or blocking noise, so they aren't for the hearing-impaired. I tried the Bell + Howell Silver Sonic XL, which looks like a Bluetooth headset and promises to amplify sounds up to 90 feet away for $19.99 each. It's good for eavesdropping on office mates but makes their keyboard clattering and snacking sounds so loud, it's impossible to get any work done.

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