Choosing and Using a Cell Phone with Your Hearing Aid or Cochlear Implant
By Lise Hamlin

Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations require hearing aid-compatible digital wireless telephones. Here are the answers to the most frequently asked questions about cell phones and the FCC regulations.

More cell phones are being manufactured with reduced radio frequency (RF) emissions to minimize interference and make them more hearing aid user friendly as a result of Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations.

If you are a hearing aid or cochlear implant user, the likelihood of finding a relatively interference free cell phone that will work with your hearing devices has increased because of improvements in cell phones and hearing instruments. We expect to see more phones in the 3G network that are compatible with hearing aids and cochlear implants.

However, because hearing loss and hearing instruments are highly individualized, it is still advisable to try out cell phones in the store before making a purchase and again at home and work within the provider's return period.

Q. What do FCC regulations require?

A. FCC regulations require that service providers and manufacturers make available cell phones that can be used with hearing aids. Those regulations came into effect September, 2005.

The percentage of handsets that must be offered by nationwide service providers (Verizon Wireless, AT&T Mobility, Sprint Nextel, and T-Mobile) with reduced interference reached 50 percent, or a minimum of ten by February, 2010. Each handset manufacturer must meet at least an M3 rating for one third of the manufacturer's handset models that it offers to service providers per digital air interface (2G, 3G, 4G).

The FCC further requires service providers and manufacturers to comply with an American National Standards Institute performance standard (ANSI C63.19) and to show compliance with a label on the box.

To view the complete FCC Fact Sheet on hearing Aid Compatibility for Wireless Telephones, go to http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/hac_wireless.pdf

Q. Does the FCC regulation guarantee that I will be able to use a cell phone with my hearing aid?

A. While there is no guarantee, phones that comply with FCC Hearing Aid Compatibility (HAC) regulations should improve the availability and usability of cell phones for hearing aid and cochlear implant users. Hearing loss and hearing aids are highly individualized so it is still
advisable to try out cell phones in the store with your hearing aid or cochlear implant before making a purchase, and again when you get home.

Q. Are cell phones that comply with FCC HAC regulations more expensive than other cell phones?

A. No. The range of features and functions of the cell phone will impact the price, but the hearing aid compatibility will not.

Q. How will I know if a cell phone complies with the new FCC regulations?

A. Beginning in September 2005, cell phones that meet FCC regulations have been labeled with the ANSI C63.19 standard rating “M 3” or “M 4” on the box. Only cell phones that meet the standard will have labels on their boxes.

Information about phones that meet the standard are also shown on the display card by the phone in service provider operated retail stores and in the product’s manual or packaging insert. This information should also be available on line with the phone’s specifications on the websites of both the manufacture and the carrier.

Q. What does “M” mean?

A. “M” refers to using the phone with a hearing aid in the microphone setting. The higher the “M” number the more likely it is you will be able to use the phone with your hearing aid on the microphone setting. The highest rating is “M 4”.

Q. How do I know if my hearing aid is likely to work with a cell phone?

A. Ask your hearing health care provider if your hearing aid has shielding for cell phone RF emissions or if the circuitry design has good immunity to interference.

Hearing aids have ratings similar to cell phones although hearing aids may not be labeled. Most new hearing aids have at least an “M 2” immunity level. Your hearing health care professional may need to contact the manufacturer of your hearing aid to determine its immunity rating.

Q. Are there phones I can use with my hearing aid on the telecoil setting?

A. There are phones on the market that will work with your telecoil. The FCC regulations require that cell phones manufactured since September 18, 2006 must offer at least two models with a “T 3” rating per digital air interface. Since February 15, 2010, manufacturers must ensure that 25 percent of their handsets per air interface must meet at least a “T 3” rating, and beginning February 15, 2011, one third must meet at least a “T 3” rating. They are labeled on the box with ratings of “T 3” or “T 4.”
Each nationwide service provider (Verizon wireless, AT&T Mobility, Sprint Nextel, and T-Mobile) must meet at least a T3 rating for three of the handset models, or a minimum of seven, it offers to customers per digital air interface.

Attaching accessories such as neckloops is another way to use a cell phone with your telecoil. Your hearing healthcare professional can assist you in choosing an appropriate accessory.

Q. What does “T” mean?

A. “T” refers to using the hearing aid set on telecoil. The higher the “T” number the more likely you will be able to use the phone with your hearing aid set on telecoil. Reduced feedback and reduced background noise are additional benefits of using a hearing aid set on telecoil during phone use.

Once cell phones are rated for telecoil use, to determine the likelihood of successful cell phone use with your hearing aid add the “T” rating number of the cell phone to the “T” rating number of your hearing aid.

Q. May I try the phone before I buy?

A. Since September 16, 2005, stores owned and operated by a wireless service provider have been providing customers with an opportunity to try out cell phones.

It’s best to try several phones before making your purchase to find the best match with your hearing aid. You will want to be sure to understand the return policy before signing up for any cell phone or service. Ask the store representative to clearly and completely state the rules applicable to your trial period. You should also be sure that any early termination fees will be waived if you determine that the cell phone you selected in the store does not work for you in other locations.

If you prefer to use your telecoil with your cell phone, be aware that some cell phones will need the telecoil setting (sometimes referred to as the “hearing aid mode”) to be activated before it will be effective. Be sure to ask the sales person to activate the telecoil before testing the phone.

Since a cell phone’s RF emissions can change depending on your location, your listening experience outside the store where you tried your phone may be different. You should test the cell phone in a number of different environments and locations to be sure that it works effectively for you. Please remember that the quality of reception can vary at times.

If you find that the phone that worked well at the store does not work at home, be sure to bring it back to the carrier within the return period. When you do, the carrier should not charge a restocking fee for returning a phone that does not work well with your hearing aid.
Q. I already have a cell phone. May I trade it in for a hearing-aid-compatible phone?

A. Consult with your service provider.

Q. Does a hearing aid user-friendly cell phone look any different from other cell phones?

A. No.

Q. What if I cannot find a cell phone that works with my hearing aid?

A. You can check with your hearing healthcare professional to determine if there is a hearing aid option for you that may work better with cell phones. Some hearing aid manufacturers will allow the hearing aid user to send in their aid to be fitted with more immune parts. Your hearing health professional can also advise you on using an accessory such as a neckloop to increase your usability of a cell phone.

More Information on Cell Phones

Video: Hearing Aid Compatibility Videos: Choosing a Cell Phone That Works For You
www.hearingloss.org/advocacy/telecomm.asp#aidvideos

Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center for Wireless Technologies www.wirelessrerc.org
Includes a checklist helping consumers searching for the right cell phone.

CTIA-The Wireless Association*
www.accesswireless.org/hearingaid

Major Cellular Manufacturers

This list is not exhaustive, but it will give you a start.

One caveat: it's not clear how often any of these websites are updated – none of the pages we viewed were date-stamped. We strongly suggest checking to see whether the handset you see on the website is still being provided.

Motorola

Motorola does a great job pulling together a lot of good information about hearing aid compatibility and has a long list of hearing aid compatible phones.
http://www.motorola.com/accessibility,
http://direct.motorola.com/ens/accessibility/Hearingaid.html
http://direct.motorola.com/ens/accessibility/CompatiblePhones.html
Nokia

Nokia also does a good job of offering and explaining accessibility features and providing a list of models that are hearing aid compatible.
http://www.nokiaaccessibility.com/hearing.html
http://www.nokiaaccessibility.com/hac.html

Research In Motion (RIM)

RIM manufactures several handsets that are hearing aid compatible. However, finding that information on their website is a struggle. While they do not list it on their sitemap, you can do a search for “Hearing Aid Compatibility” and find background and a listing of handsets that are hearing-aid compatible. We’ve done the search so you don’t have to:
http://www.blackberry.com/btsc/search.do?cmd=displayKC&docType=kc&externalId=KB04540

Samsung

Samsung not only lists the ratings of phones that are designated hearing aid compatible, but those that are not, and keeps a listing of discontinued models. Samsung also has a designated agent to address consumer complaints or inquiries related to Disability Rights right on the website.
www.samsungtelecom.com/contact_us/accessibility.asp

LG

LG also made it difficult to find a list of hearing-aid-compatible phones. The search tool for the LG website did not find “hearing aid compatible” but if you went to the sitemap, linked to “mobile support” you could then find the link to “Hearing Aid Compatibility.”

Sony-Ericsson

Sony-Ericsson also makes it difficult to find hearing aid compatible phones by a simple search. However, they do list hearing-aid-compatible handsets in their “Special Needs Center” section of the website, a link to which can be found on their home page. Once in that section of the website, there is a lot of good general information. However, only four handsets are listed as HAC, and none of those handsets can be found with a search on the main Sony-Ericson website.
Also their reports to the FCC that are posted are dated January and July 2009. Looks like an update to their website is needed.

http://www.sonyericsson-snc.com/index.asp

Major National Cellular Carriers

All carriers listed below have done a great job of providing easily searchable websites for hearing aid compatibility information with listing of hearing-aid-compatible phones.

Our caveat regarding availability of the devices listed on websites bears repeating: it’s not clear how often any of these websites are updated – none of the pages we viewed were date-stamped. We strongly suggest checking to see whether the handset you see on the website is still being provided by the carrier before you fall in love with it.

AT&T
http://www.wireless.att.com/learn/articles-resources/disability-resources/hearing-aid-compatibility.jsp

Sprint

T-Mobile

Verizon Wireless
http://aboutus.vzw.com/accessibility/products.html
http://aboutus.vzw.com/accessibility/digitalPhones.html

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