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Owning Our Hearing Loss

BY LISE HAMLIN

On August 16, 2022, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued the final rule regulating over-the-counter (OTC) hearing aids.

This long-awaited regulation, touted by the White House, the FDA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, garnered widespread national news and focused important attention on the growing problem of hearing loss. HLAA's Executive Director Barbara Kelley was interviewed by dozens of media outlets, helping the public understand the importance of this new rule.

See HLAA's news clips at:
hearingloss.org/news-media/hlaa-in-the-news/.

HLAA's OTC Hearing Aid Advocacy Efforts

As a longtime advocate for accessible and affordable hearing loss treatment, HLAA supports the addition of OTC hearing aids to the market. Although there's no one-size-fits-all approach to hearing loss, we believe this could encourage some people to treat their hearing loss sooner, reduce the cost and stigma associated with hearing aids, and stimulate innovation, which could benefit millions of people with hearing loss.

With the publication of the new rule, consumers will see OTC hearing aids in stores starting in October 2022. This is an entirely new category of hearing aids designed for adults with mild to moderate hearing loss, available without involving a doctor, audiologist or hearing instrument specialist. To learn more about purchasing these products, see HLAA's OTC hearing aid tip sheet or go to hearingloss.org/otc.

HLAA has been involved with OTC hearing aid legislation from the beginning and we were one of 1,000 to provide comments to the FDA regarding the proposed rule. We urged the FDA to include consumer protection provisions such as clear labeling and cellphone compatibility, which was adopted. Outside package labeling will indicate whether a smartphone, or other non-included control platform is required to operate the OTC hearing aid.

OTC Hearing Aid Return Policy

HLAA also strongly recommended a requirement for a 45-day return period, as well as prohibiting the seller from charging any undisclosed fees. These were not included in the final rule, so it'll be up to the consumer to look for and understand a product's return policy, which is required to be printed on the box. For information on OTC return policies, read this HLAA blog post: <https://www.hearingloss.org/otc-hearing-aids-returns-a-key-piece-of-the-puzzle/>.

Most experts agree that it can often take weeks for the brain to adjust to a hearing aid. Consumers may need to try multiple devices in order to find one that works for them, so a good return policy may be the key to your success. HLAA is disappointed that the FDA declined to require a free trial period,

but we believe that good products with this feature will become apparent as the market plays out.

Find What Works for You

It's up to you to be an educated consumer when you purchase any hearing aid, whether it's an over-the-counter product, or one from a professional's office. You need to ask questions, understand the device capabilities, services and fees associated with your purchase.

Hearing aids, whether OTC or not, are not your grandma's hearing aids, but they are also not fully functioning ears. You need to consider your daily life, how much you watch TV or listen to music, do you go to meetings, or do you have children in your household? In a perfect world, what would you want from a hearing aid? What are your priorities when it comes to hearing better?

We expect traditionally reliable resources such as *Hearing Tracker* and *Consumer Reports* to have helpful information on OTC products as they hit the market. The New York Times' Wirecutter took an advanced look at some OTC devices. Read the Wirecutter piece at: <https://www.nytimes.com/wirecutter/reviews/best-over-the-counter-hearing-aids>.

This AARP piece encourages consumers of any hearing aid to do their homework to understand the features and terms of the purchase.

Read AARP's story at <https://www.aarp.org/health/conditions-treatments/info-2022/over-the-counter-hearing-aid-facts.html>.

You should never feel pressured to purchase any hearing device. And if the device does not perform as advertised, you can complain to the FDA. The FDA will take complaints at: <https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/medwatch/index.cfm>.

The over-the-counter hearing aid law and the supporting regulation has the potential to empower you to take your own hearing loss seriously, to understand it, to take the initiative to find the right device that fits the kind of life you lead. Undoubtedly, it will mean you need to take the time to research products, to understand the return and warranty policies, and perhaps to try more than one hearing device. Whatever the choice, you must own it. To be empowered to manage our own hearing loss, you must take responsibility for your hearing loss. You're the one who knows it best! HLAA is here for ongoing information and resources to help empower anyone along their hearing health journey.

See page 37 to learn more about how to join HLAA's community of support. **HL**

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The HLAA 2022 Convention was June 23-25 in Tampa. Our convention archive, including the recording of our Research Symposium on cochlear implants, will be online at hearingloss.org. We look forward to seeing you at the HLAA 2023 Convention in New Orleans, June 29-July 1, 2023. Registration opens soon.