



## The Sleek, Chic, High-Tech . . . Hearing Aid

Latest Pricey Devices Offer  
Customization, Discretion;  
Do You Really Need Bluetooth?

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August 28, 2007; Page D1

Choosing a hearing aid is getting complicated.

Racing green, or cabernet red? A sleek geometric triangle, or an artsy teardrop-like curve? Switzerland's Bernafon AG offers a red one with a white cross that might coordinate with your Swiss Army knife.

And it's not just about looks: Computer technology is improving the sound quality of hearing aids, as well as the ability to customize the devices. Devices can be programmed to tune out sounds like high-pitched clanking of silverware and the dull hum of voices at a noisy restaurant. Some devices let users hear their Bluetooth cellphones through a hearing aid. And many newer hearing aids are so tiny as to be hardly noticeable.



Phonak's Audéo comes in colors like 'Green with Envy' and runs \$2,500-\$3,000 per ear.

"Technology in hearing aids has become extremely sophisticated at the high end," says Nancy Catterall, director of audiology at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia. Even the less-expensive digital hearing aids, she adds, "are as good as the higher-end devices were several years ago."

But as hearing aids become more complex, the array of new choices can be confusing. Even the trusty old volume control -- which everyone understands -- is increasingly being replaced by tech-sounding phrases such as "integrated signal processing." And with prices that can reach \$2,000 to \$6,000 a pair, it's easy to overspend on a device that exceeds your needs, audiologists say. If your needs are mainly talking to family at home and watching television, you don't need a high-end device, audiologists say.

Some hearing experts also warn against choosing a device just for its small size. Chris Halpin, an audiologist at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary in Boston, says he fears the new emphasis on small and hip is resulting in "wimpy" devices that don't have enough amplification power to help patients with serious hearing problems. Patients

come in wanting nearly invisible solutions, but to many he breaks the bad news: "You need a big hearing aid, and you need it loud."

With the complexity of hearing aids today, it is important to find a practitioner with whom you have good personal chemistry, and who will take the time to let you try various devices, Dr. Halpin says. The cost of hearing aids is generally not covered by insurance.

Hearing loss can be caused by age alone, or can be a side effect of some medicines or a lifetime of listening to loud music or on-the-job noise. By age 65, nearly a third of Americans have hearing loss, and 40% to 50% develop it by age 75, according to the National Institutes of Health. But resistance to hearing aids is high: According to the NIH, only one in five of the people who could benefit from a hearing aid wears one.

### **Perched Behind the Ears**

Increasingly, people buying hearing aids are rejecting the old-fashioned "custom-fitted" mold, which fits into the ear like a giant flesh-colored ear plug. "They try to make them blend in with your skin, but they look terrible, like a glob of wax in your ear," says Craig Kuhns, a 56-year-old operating-room nurse from Dallas. He recently chose a set of red-and-black Audéo devices from Switzerland's [Phonak](#) AG, which perch behind his ears and extend into the ear canal via a clear, nearly invisible tube. The day he got the hearing aids, Mr. Kuhns went to dinner at his brother-in-law's house and nobody noticed them until he broke the news later, says his wife, Nancy.

In addition to having aesthetic appeal, the new, smaller behind-the-ear devices are popular for their "open-fit," which doesn't block your natural hearing. "The new devices have opened up the world of hearing aids to people who rejected them because of the feeling of being plugged up," says Allen Senne, director of audiology at the House Ear Clinic in Los Angeles.

The newer smaller devices have driven overall sales of behind-the-ear devices from 44% last year to 50.2% of hearing-aid sales in the first half of this year -- exceeding sales of in-ear molds for the first time since 1982, says the Hearing Industries Association, a Washington, D.C., trade group of hearing-aid makers.

Manufacturers say even the smallest devices are adequately powerful for people with mild-to-moderate hearing loss, but add that larger devices often provide optimum results. Denmark's Oticon A/S, for example, says people who want the very best sound quality should choose its more traditional-looking Epoq model rather than the tiny triangle-shaped Delta it markets as "so cool that you'll be tempted to show it off."

Audiologists recommend that people looking for a hearing aid get a thorough hearing test and see a doctor to make sure hearing loss isn't correctible with medication or surgery.

When buying a hearing aid, the first choice is whether to go with analog or the more-popular digital devices. Analog hearing aids can be less expensive. But digital hearing aids -- in which incoming sound is processed with a computer chip before being fed into your ear -- enables almost limitless massaging of the sound. Digital hearing aids make value judgments, attempting to tell the difference between a person's voice and noise, such as the hum of an air-conditioner.

The Phonak Audéo, for example, automatically switches among four programs, one for music, one for quiet, one for speech alone and one for speech and noise together. Both the Audéo and the GN ReSound Azure from Denmark's Great Nordic AG remember if you make a volume change -- and automatically make the same adjustment next time they encounter a similar sound pattern.

On some devices, you also can use a remote to manually switch between the various "listening programs" or override the computer. For example, many of the hearing aids will automatically put the device in "directional" mode when they sense background noise, emphasizing sounds in front of you and softening others. If you're having a conversation with a person in front of you, that helps. But if you are in a crowded room waiting for someone who may hail you from behind, you might want to change the setting, says Thomas Powers, an audiologist with Siemens Hearing Instruments, a unit of New York-based [Siemens](#) Corp.

You can also have devices custom-programmed for your lifestyle. Mr. Kuhns says he plans to have a program made to enhance sounds in the operating room, where he still has trouble hearing the muffled voices of doctors wearing surgical masks over the hum of machines. Typically, there is no extra fee for custom programming when you purchase hearing aids.

People who telephone a lot might want a device that automatically switches to a special program when it encounters the magnetic field of a phone. If you hate the hassle of replacing batteries every week or two, at least two devices -- Siemens's Centra Active and Great Nordic's Pulse -- are rechargeable. You place the entire hearing aid into the charger when you go to bed.

## **Hearing at a Hearing**

The geek-minded can listen to their Bluetooth cellphone or navigation system through the Oticon Epoq. You need a device called a Streamer, for about \$175, which you hang around your neck or hold to your face while talking on a cellphone. Another Bluetooth option, Phonak's SmartLink, costs \$1,500 to \$2,000 and also serves as a radio-wave transmitter that pipes sound to the hearing aid from up to 100 feet away, for example to help a lawyer hear a witness in the courtroom.

Beware, though, an omission on many sleek new devices: volume control. Widex Hearing Aid Co. of Long Island City, N.Y., for instance, offers several lines -- including a new tiny m-Series with "integrated signal processing" software but no volume adjuster.

The company says the software helps create clearer, more natural sound. "If a hearing aid is programmed correctly, a volume control isn't needed," says Widex audiologist Richard Cortez.

Users who can't live without a volume control can often purchase a separate remote with a volume button.

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