

Just Don't Call Them Hearing Aids

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MARCH 22, 2014

People who strain to hear conversations in noisy places sometimes shun hearing appliances as telltale signs of aging. But what if those devices looked like wireless phone receivers? Some companies are betting that the high-tech look of a new generation of sound amplifiers will tempt people to try them.

The new in-ear amps come with wireless technology and typically cost \$300 to \$500. The devices include directional microphones and can be fine-tuned by smartphone apps.

Whatever you do, don't call these amplifiers [hearing aids](#). They are not considered medical devices like the ones overseen by the [Food and Drug Administration](#) and dispensed by professionals to aid those with impaired hearing. Rather, they are over-the-counter systems cleared by the F.D.A. for occasional use in situations when speech and other sounds are hard to discern — say, in a noisy restaurant or while bird-watching.

“The market is proliferating with lots of devices not necessarily made for impaired hearing, but for someone who wants a boost in certain challenging conditions like lectures,” said Neil J. DiSarno, chief staff officer for [audiology](#) at the [American Speech-Language-Hearing Association](#).



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Dr. DiSarno is among the many audiologists who strongly urge people to see a physician first, in order to rule out medical causes of [hearing loss](#), which could vary from earwax to a tumor, rather than self-diagnosing and self-treating a condition.

Carole Rogin, president of the [Hearing Industries Association](#), a trade group, said the biggest problem with personal amplification products was that people might use them instead of seeking appropriate medical oversight. “Untreated hearing loss is not a benign condition,” she said. “We want people to do something about it as soon as they notice a problem,” rather than using these devices to mask a potentially dangerous condition.

Hearing aids are manufactured and sold to specific standards, she noted. “So we have a bunch of very clever marketing messages to sell devices that are outside the regulatory requirements for hearing aids, both in manufacture and in conditions for sale,” she said.

Hearing-aid makers, too, have added wireless technology and high-tech looks to their devices. But the new wireless amplification systems cost thousands of dollars less. A potentially huge market exists for them, said Venkat Rajan, an analyst at [Frost & Sullivan](#) who follows the market for hearing products, particularly if companies use a nuanced marketing approach that directs consumers away from images of aging and disability and toward practical communication benefits.

Baby boomers, he said, seem very willing to pay out-of-pocket for health-related products. “You buy one device for \$300, and then get the next, better one when it comes on the market next year,” he said.

But it’s not the technology or the price that will be decisive in selling these products to baby boomers, said [Daniel Pink](#), author of “To Sell Is Human.” “We all know that boomers have drunk from the fountain of youth, and will never need or use a product that their parents use, like a cane or hearing aid,” he said.

If in-ear amplifiers don’t have the look and feel of a hearing aid, boomers and others might actually consider wearing them, he said: “You fuse the technology of extra support and utility with ways to make the devices acceptable.”

One company in the market, [Sound World Solutions](#), will introduce a second version of its CS10 Bluetooth-enabled sound amplifier and app in April, said Kevin Daniels, director of sales and marketing. The new model, called the CS50 and costing \$399, allows wearers to program and control the in-ear amplifier via free apps for Android and iPhone smartphones. Both left- and right-ear versions are available.

The product looks much like a Bluetooth headset, and not by accident. “We designed it to look like a Bluetooth device, and not to look like a hearing aid,” Mr. Daniels said. The model lets users set their own auditory profiles, or use one of the preset levels, including one for the clamor of busy restaurants.

Users can also stream music or audiobooks and make mobile phone calls, Mr. Daniels said. “Whatever you pair this device to,” he said, “it will play the audio in the device.” It uses a low-energy form of Bluetooth that lasts up to 15 hours on a single charge, he said.

Another app-paired amplifier, created by [Soundhawk](#), is due later this year, said Michael Kisch, the company's president and chief executive. Soundhawk has raised \$5.7 million from [True Ventures](#) and other investors. The product, which will cost several hundred dollars, won't be called an earpiece. "That sounds like a hairpiece," Mr. Kisch said. Instead, the company will have a new vocabulary for its product, he said, disclosing only that it would be "much more compelling to consumers."

The system, he said, "will feel like a highly engineered product to improve your life." Users will control the amplifier via the app, optimizing it for different environments. "While you are listening, you drag your fingers on the smartphone screen, manipulating the audio to get where the sound is best for you," he said. The device reconfigures for that preference.

"Our approach is to create a product people want, rather than one that makes them face their mortality or aspects of the aging process," Mr. Kisch said. "You have to build products people want, not ones they are dragged to get by loved ones."