Self-Advocacy Guide for Blind Hearing Aid Users

Blind people who are deaf or hard of hearing have the right to effective communication, meaningful participation, and access to information. This comprehensive guide is for blind people who use hearing aids, or are considering getting some and contains expert advice to help you make the most of your hearing, technology, and professional support. It covers things that every hearing aid wearer should know, but also delves into issues unique to blind people.

Quick Access: Find What You Need

- **Section 1: Learn what hearing aids can and cannot do**, the main styles available, battery options, and why using two hearing aids may matter for safety and direction.
- **Section 2: Make hearing aids work in real life:** Find guidance on programs for different places, using hearing aids with screen readers and devices, external microphones, TV listening, and accessory controls.
- **Section 3: Understand newer and older audio technology:** Learn about Auracast, Bluetooth LE Audio, telecoils, hearing loops, and other tools that can help you hear more clearly in public places.
- **Section 4: Consider lower-cost hearing aid options carefully:** Review over-the-counter hearing aids, AirPods Pro hearing features, Costco hearing aids, and key cautions for blind users.
- **Section 5: People and places to know and go:** Find people, professionals, and peer communities that can help you get hearing access, ask for assistive listening devices, and connect with others who understand blind hearing aid use.

Section 1 Starts Here: What to Know About Hearing Aids

Hearing Aids Versus Glasses: A Reality Check

Hearing aids do not "fix" hearing loss in the way glasses correct vision. They improve hearing significantly, but even the best hearing aids cannot fully replicate normal hearing function. Glasses refocus light for a clear image; hearing aids amplify and process sound but cannot give you back the exact quality of natural hearing. For example, you may still find it hard to understand speech in noise or locate where a sound is coming from, because hearing technology cannot perfectly mimic the complex processing of a healthy ear.

Be patient with the adjustment process. When first using hearing aids, your brain needs time to relearn interpreting sounds. It's normal for things to sound "tinny" or overly loud at first. Stick with it. Consistent use and possibly auditory training exercises will help your brain adapt to the new input. Unlike putting on glasses (where vision is instantly clear), hearing improvement is often gradual as your brain adjusts to amplified sounds and filters.

Understand the limitations in challenging environments. Even with hearing aids, **certain situations will remain difficult,** like noisy restaurants or distant speakers. Modern hearing aids offer features to help (noise reduction, directional microphones, etc.), but they are not magic. Background noise, reverberation, or multiple people talking at once can still overwhelm the system. This is not a personal failure or a device malfunction; it is an inherent limitation of current technology and the complexity of human hearing. It will help a great deal to face the person whose voice you want to hear. Hearing aids will often filter out noise not coming from directly in front of you. It is also worth remembering that much of the research hearing aid companies use to demonstrate speech understanding in noise is conducted with people who are not blind. In real life, many people fill in

missed auditory information by using visual cues such as lip movements and facial expressions. If you are blind, you may not have access to those cues, which can make communication in noise even more demanding.

Types of Hearing Aids: ITE, RIC, and BTE

Hearing aids come in several styles. Knowing the basic types will help you discuss options with your audiologist and choose what fits your hearing loss and lifestyle. Here are three common categories (with examples) and their characteristics:

Behind-the-Ear (BTE)

- **Placement and Features:** BTE sits behind the outer ear; a tube connects to an earmold that fits in your ear. BTEs have a larger case that holds the electronics (microphone, amplifier, battery) behind the ear. This size allows **more power and features.** Modern BTEs can be color-matched or discreet.
- **Suitable for:** Mild to **profound** hearing loss. Good for users who want robust amplification and for children, since the earmold can be replaced as they grow without replacing the whole aid.

Receiver-in-Canal (RIC), also called Receiver-in-the-Ear (RITE)

- **Placement and Features:** RIC or RITE is a newer variation of BTE: the small casing sits behind the ear, but instead of a thick tube and earmold, a thin wire carries the signal to a **speaker (receiver) placed directly in the ear canal.** This design makes the aid **lighter and less visible** than a traditional BTE. Often a small dome or custom tip holds the receiver in the canal. RICs allow some natural sound in (venting), which can make sound feel more natural.
- **Suitable for:** Typically, mild to **severe** hearing loss. Great for those who want a **discreet look** and a more open, comfortable ear fitting.

In-the-Ear (ITE) and In-the-Canal variants: ITC, CIC

- **Placement and Features:** **Custom-fitted** aids worn entirely in the ear. An ITE fills the outer ear bowl (full-shell or half-shell), while **in-the-canal (ITC)** aids sit partly in the ear canal and **completely-in-canal (CIC)** aids are nearly hidden deep in the canal. All components are in a single plastic shell. These are **low-profile and convenient** for people who wear glasses or masks.
- **Suitable for:** ITE (larger custom models) suit **moderate to severe** losses. Smaller ITC/CIC aids are generally for mild to moderate loss. Ideal if you prioritise

The best style for you depends on your degree of hearing loss, personal preferences, and dexterity. For example, if you have a severe loss and need lots of amplification, a BTE might be recommended for its power and larger battery. If you want something inconspicuous and have a mild loss, an ITC or CIC could be appealing, but keep in mind those have smaller batteries (changed more often) and usually lack room for features like telecoil or Bluetooth (though some newer tiny aids do include them). RICs strike a balance; they are fairly discreet and comfortable but still accommodate many features and power levels.

Handling and maintenance

If you have **limited tactile sensitivity or dexterity,** mention this to your provider. Larger BTEs and ITEs might be easier for you to feel, insert, and operate than very small CIC aids. Also, BTEs and RICs with rechargeable batteries might be beneficial if you find changing tiny zinc-air batteries difficult. **In contrast, small CIC aids require very steady hands to clean, and battery changes are fiddly.** Always consider how you will manage day-to-day use of the aids when selecting a style.

Retention options can make hearing aids easier to manage. Retention devices are available for many hearing aid styles, including cords or clips that attach to the aids and fasten to your clothing.

These can help prevent loss if an aid slips out and may be especially useful if you are active, wear glasses or masks, or simply want extra peace of mind while learning to handle a new pair.

Finally, don't hesitate to try different styles if possible. Most audiologists have demos; you can see how a BTE feels versus a RIC, how easily you can find the buttons, and so on. The right choice is individual. We often hear from people who weren't initially offered a range of options and later wondered if another style or brand might have suited their needs better. So ask about alternatives if you're curious; a good professional will help you weigh the pros and cons of each style for your specific situation.

Take your time when choosing. There is another important reason to trial different options: hearing aids don't all process audio in the same way. Different brands use different algorithms to amplify sound, manage noise, and preserve the spatial qualities of what you hear. What sounds clear and natural to one person may feel processed, harsh, or muffled to another. This matters especially for a blind person, for whom hearing provides information that sighted people get visually. Take the time to try at least two or three different models in real-world scenarios, including walking outdoors, sitting in a noisy environment, and using your screen reader with the aids. The difference between brands can be striking, and finding the right fit is worth the effort. Given how fundamental your hearing is to everything you do, this is one situation where it really pays to shop around.

Batteries: Rechargeable and Replaceable

Rechargeable hearing aids have become increasingly popular, and it's easy to see why. You simply place them in their charging case at the end of the day and they're ready to go in the morning. No fumbling with tiny zinc-air batteries, no remembering to stock up on replacements, and no disposal to think about.

However, if you're a blind hearing aid user, your battery demands are likely to be higher than average, and that's something worth thinking carefully about before you commit to a rechargeable model. Throughout a typical day, you're probably going to be connecting your aids to external devices for a significant portion of the time. Streaming VoiceOver or TalkBack from your smartphone, routing your computer's screen reader through a Bluetooth streamer, listening to audiobooks on a Victor Reader Stream, or connecting to an external microphone for a meeting; all of these activities draw more power than using the aids simply as amplifiers. The real-world battery life under those conditions can be noticeably shorter than the headline figure the manufacturer quotes.

Before choosing rechargeable aids, ask specifically about battery life during active Bluetooth streaming, not just during normal amplification use. Aim for a pair that will comfortably last through your longest typical day with charge to spare. Running flat mid-afternoon is inconvenient at best; in a situation where you're depending on your aids for safety, it's considerably worse.

Knowing your aids are charged is equally important. Many charging cases use LED indicator lights to show charging status. If you cannot see those lights, you need another way to be certain. Some aids play a tone or spoken prompt when they're placed in the charger. Some manufacturer apps show battery status in a form your screen reader can read. Others rely entirely on visual indicators, which won't help you at all. Ask about this before you buy, and test it. The last thing you want is to go to bed unsure whether your aids charged properly, then find them flat in the morning at a moment when you need them most.

This is exactly why some blind people still prefer hearing aids with replaceable zinc-air batteries. They require a little more handling, but they offer a real advantage: if your battery dies while you're out and about, you simply pop in a fresh one. Carrying a spare set costs very little and takes up almost no space in a bag or pocket. For someone who depends on their hearing aids for navigating independently, crossing streets, or getting around in unfamiliar environments, that kind of backup is

genuinely reassuring. If your aids support replaceable batteries, it's worth keeping spares with you, just in case.

Think about drying and hygiene as part of daily maintenance. If you are prone to moisture buildup, earwax issues, or recurring ear infections, a hearing aid drying system or dehumidifier may be useful. Some devices also include sanitizing functions for earmolds or hearing aids. However, check carefully before using heat-based drying products with rechargeable hearing aids, because some devices can be damaged by excessive heat. Your audiologist can tell you which drying systems are safe for your specific model.

Bilateral Hearing for Directional Awareness

Humans have two ears for a reason: having hearing input from both sides is crucial for locating sounds in space and maintaining spatial awareness. For blind people, this is especially critical, since hearing often substitutes for vision in detecting and pinpointing things in the environment.

If you have hearing loss in both ears, wearing hearing aids on both sides (bilateral fitting) is very important. Using only one aid (while the other ear remains unaided or much weaker) can leave you disoriented about where sounds are coming from. Our brain compares the signals from left and right ears to figure out direction, a process called *binaural localization.* It uses cues like the tiny difference in **arrival time** of a sound between the ears, and differences in **loudness** between ears (your head blocks some sound to the far ear). With two well-balanced ears, you naturally perceive if a sound is to your left or right, and even somewhat if it is ahead or behind you.

When one ear isn't hearing well (or not aided), those cues break down. For example, if all sound is only amplified on your left side, **everything may subjectively seem to come from the left,** even things happening on your right, because your right ear isn't contributing accurate information. This is both a safety issue (you might misjudge the location of oncoming traffic or a speaking person) and an everyday annoyance (harder to orient toward whoever's talking in a group, etc.).

One blind person who lost hearing in one ear in mid-life noted that hearing loss was more disabling to her than blindness, because as a blind person she relied on her ears to navigate and communicate, and losing input on one side made that infinitely harder. This underscores how vital it is for blind people to maximise whatever hearing ability they have in both ears.

Why bilateral hearing aids help:

- **They preserve or restore the stereo/spatial sound image.** You'll have a better sense of which direction a sound (like an approaching car or a person calling your name) is coming from, because each aid delivers sound tailored to that side.
- **They improve hearing in noise:** With two ears, your brain can focus on the ear with a better signal (the "better ear effect") and suppress noise from other directions. Binaural hearing aids can also communicate with each other and coordinate directional microphones, which enhances speech understanding in noise.
- **They give a sense of balance and fullness to sound.** One-aided listeners often describe everything as "coming from one side" or the sound being "flat." Two aids can make listening feel more natural and less strenuous.

If you currently use only one hearing aid but have loss in both ears, discuss with your audiologist whether a second aid would be beneficial. Modern hearing aids even have features for bilateral coordination (for example, adjusting volume or programs in sync, streaming phone audio to both ears, etc., which greatly help in sound quality and comprehension).

Special note: In cases of single-sided deafness (one ear cannot benefit from an aid), there are solutions like CROS or BiCROS systems; these send sound from the deaf side over to the better ear. While that doesn't restore true directional hearing, it at least lets you hear sounds occurring on your deaf side. It might be worth exploring these if you have one "dead" ear. But if both ears have usable hearing, **do take advantage of bilateral aids.**

Ultimately, directional hearing = safer and more confident movement. As a blind person, you use subtle auditory cues to know, for instance, which direction traffic is flowing, where a crossing signal beeper is, or which person at a meeting table is speaking. Two ears working together will give you far superior information for these tasks than one ear alone.

Section 2: Making Hearings Aids Work for You

Tailoring Hearing Aid Programs for Different Environments

Modern hearing aids are not one-size-fits-all in terms of settings, and that is a good thing. They often come with multiple programs or modes that you (or the aids automatically) can switch between, optimizing how you hear in various situations. As a blind hearing aid user, it is critical to have the right program for the right context. In particular, you will want to strike a balance between hearing important ambient sounds and reducing unwanted noise.

Why multiple programs matter: The listening needs of a blind person can be *opposite* depending on the scenario. For instance:

- **In a crowded, noisy indoor environment (like a restaurant or conference):** You probably want to minimise background chatter and focus on the speaker you're trying to hear. Many hearing aids have a "speech-in-noise" program that does exactly this; it engages directional microphones (focusing forward) and noise reduction to dampen babble and clatter. Newer aids are even using artificial intelligence to make decisions about what is important for you to hear at any given moment, and they can achieve remarkable results.
- **Walking outside or crossing a street:** Here, **you actually need to hear the background.** The rush of cars, bikes ringing bells, people walking up behind you, and so on. If you used that same aggressive noise-reduction program from the restaurant, it might filter out the very sounds that keep you oriented and safe! Ideally you'd use a different program when travelling outdoors, one that is more omnidirectional (listens all around) with **minimal noise filtering,** so you can catch environmental cues.

Set up a "travel" program: Talk to your audiologist about creating a custom program for when you are out and about. This program could keep wind noise reduction (to cut wind rumble) but turn off digital noise suppression that might eliminate steady sounds like engine noise. It might also set the microphones to **omni mode** (listening 360°) instead of focus-forward. Some users simply use their default program for this, but make sure your default is not too "smart" in a way that harmfully suppresses noise. On many aids, the default auto program might try to quiet consistent noise (like road noise). If you find you are not hearing enough when walking, manually switch to a program that keeps that background audible.

Use your "speech in noise" features strategically: When you enter a chaotic sound environment and your goal is to hear one or two people talking, that's the time to engage a directional, noise-reducing program. If your aids have an automatic mode, they might detect the noise and activate a "restaurant" setting on their own. If not, you can often switch programs via a button on the aid or a phone app. Do it proactively. One tip from audiologists: **don't wait until you're already overwhelmed by noise.** Switch to the noise program as soon as you sit down in the crowded room. This way you start with a cleaner slate and experience less listening fatigue.

Remember to switch back: The key is not forgetting to change programs when your situation changes. If you leave the mall and go back outside, you might need to switch out of "noise mode" so you can hear traffic again. Some hearing aids allow assigning different programs to different environments automatically, but if yours doesn't, it's up to you to be mindful. With practice it becomes quick (many aids beep to indicate program change, for example two beeps for Program 2).

Auto vs manual: Many devices today handle a lot automatically; they sample the sound environment and adjust directionality and noise reduction on the fly. This is convenient, but auto systems can be a bit too "generic." As a blind user, **don't be afraid to override the automatic behaviour** if it's not suiting you. For instance, auto mode might reduce air conditioner hum (nice) but also reduce far-off road noise (not nice if you need to hear approaching cars). Get comfortable with your manual controls. Typically:

- A push-button on the hearing aid or a smartphone app can cycle programs.
- Some aids let you store several custom programs (for example, "Indoor quiet," "Noisy place," "Outdoor travel") and give them names in the app.
- If you have a remote control accessory, label it or memorize the button sequence for different modes.

Ask your audiologist to make program changes easy for you. For example, they can often activate a feature that plays a spoken announcement or distinct tone when you change programs ("Program 1, All-around; Program 2, Restaurant," etc.), so you always know which one you're in. They can also adjust the strength of noise reduction in each program. Don't be shy about reporting back: "In Program 2 (noise mode), I still heard too much clatter," or conversely, "Program 2 made it so quiet I couldn't tell what direction cars were coming from." They can tweak those parameters for you.

Key takeaway: Use the technology to *your* advantage. Multiple programs are there to be used. It might feel like extra hassle at first (remembering to switch), but it can dramatically improve your hearing experience and safety. With time, flipping between a couple of frequently-used modes will become second nature.

Using Hearing Aids with Screen Readers and Devices (Bluetooth Connectivity)

Today's hearing aids increasingly support **Bluetooth wireless connectivity,** which can be a game-changer for screen reader users. Instead of struggling to hear your computer's screen reader or phone's voice output in a noisy room (or disturbing others with the loud volume), you can often **pair your hearing aids directly to your phone, tablet, or computer** and stream audio straight into your ears.

If you use an iPhone or iPad, many hearing aids are labelled "Made for iPhone" (MFi). These devices use a special low-energy Bluetooth protocol to connect directly with Apple products. Once paired, your iPhone can send VoiceOver speech, music, calls, and in fact all audio, to your hearing aids wirelessly. You can typically answer phone calls and hear them in your aids, and even use your aids as the phone microphone in some cases. Apple's integration is quite good: for example, you can triple-click the home button to bring up hearing control, or use the Accessibility > Hearing Devices menu to adjust your aids from the phone's screen. If you have an Apple Watch, it can even control basic hearing aid settings when connected. Check Apple's support page for instructions, or ask your audiologist to help pair them.

VoiceOver users: You'll find that streaming VoiceOver to your hearing aids can greatly clarify the speech (no background noise interference) and let you use your phone in public discreetly. Just be aware of latency. Most MFi aids have minimal delay, but if you experience a lag between the screen

action and VoiceOver speech, mention it to your audiologist. Some adjustments or firmware updates might improve it. If the latency is too noticeable, and you're still trying out a pair, that's a reasonable reason to try another model.

In the past, Android phones were trickier with hearing aids, but it's improving. Google introduced the ASHA protocol (Audio Streaming for Hearing Aids), which many modern Android phones (typically Android 10 and above with Bluetooth 5.0) support. This is similar to Apple's solution. It streams audio in an energy-efficient way directly to hearing aids. Check if your hearing aids are ASHA-compatible (your audiologist or the manufacturer's site can tell you). If they are, pairing is usually done through the Accessibility > Hearing aid menu on your Android phone, rather than the general Bluetooth menu. Many Samsung Galaxy, Google Pixel, and other major phones of recent years support ASHA streaming. Additionally, the newest generation of hearing aids is starting to adopt **Bluetooth LE Audio,** which is a next-generation standard. Part of that standard includes Auracast broadcasting, which we'll return to later in this guide. LE Audio will unify how devices connect so that ideally one solution works across Apple, Android, PCs, and more. If you're in the market for new aids in 2026 and beyond, ask if they support Bluetooth LE Audio, as this will future-proof your connectivity.

For now, if you have an Android that doesn't support direct streaming, don't despair. Some hearing aids (notably Phonak's recent models) use classic Bluetooth and can pair with any Bluetooth audio source, like a regular headset. For example, Phonak aids can directly connect to an Android phone, a computer, or even a Victor Reader Stream via standard Bluetooth (without special protocols). The upside is broad compatibility; the downside can be shorter battery life and sometimes a limit of one device connected at a time. If you primarily use Android, ensure your aids are either ASHA or classic Bluetooth capable. Consult the manufacturer's phone compatibility list or ask your audiologist which phones work best. This can influence your choice of hearing aid brand or even phone model.

Many people don't realise you can also pair hearing aids to laptops or desktops (if the aids have Bluetooth). This can route JAWS or NVDA speech, Zoom meetings, music, and more, directly into your hearing aids. There are a few ways to do this:

- **Classic Bluetooth (like some Phonak models):** Put the aids in pairing mode and connect in your PC's Bluetooth settings just like you would with headphones. The PC will typically see them as a "headset" or "headphones." Once connected, set them as the default audio output. Make sure to select any "stereo" audio profile if one is listed.
- **MFi or ASHA only aids (not recognised as standard audio devices by a PC):** You might use the manufacturer's intermediary accessory. Some brands have a Bluetooth streamer, a small dongle or clip, that pairs with the aids via a proprietary link and with the computer via standard Bluetooth. Or they have a USB Bluetooth adapter purpose-made for their hearing aids. Ask about these accessories if direct PC connection is important for you.
- **Telecoil via neckloop:** Plug a personal neckloop into your computer's headphone jack and switch your aids to T (telecoil) mode. The neckloop acts as a wireless transmitter around your neck that your hearing aids pick up. This is an older but sometimes very handy solution if digital pairing is problematic.

For screen reader users, having the speech directly in your ear can increase speed and accuracy of comprehension. You can turn up the speech without also amplifying every Windows error ding to the whole room. One caution: if you rely on auditory cues for orientation, be mindful when you have your aids streaming audio. Strong streamed audio can mask environmental sounds. For example, if you're walking down the street listening to VoiceOver directions through your aids, you might miss a cyclist's shout. A solution is to use a hearing aid program that mixes ambient sound with streamed audio

(many aids allow you to set the "mix", for example hearing 70% stream and 30% outside world). Your audiologist can adjust the stream volume relative to outside sounds in the hearing aid fitting software. This way you're not deaf to the world while your phone chats away in your ear.

- **Pairing mode:** Typically, to pair, you open and close the battery doors, or put the aids in the charger then take them out (for rechargeables) to set them in discovery mode. You then find them on your device. Each manufacturer may differ, so use their manual instructions.
- **Switching between devices:** Some hearing aids remember multiple pairings (for example, phone and tablet) and auto-switch to whatever is active. Others may require re-pairing or manual switching. If you need to use with, say, a work PC and a personal phone, ask your provider about models known for good multi-device support.
- **Latency:** For activities like using a screen reader or playing a musical instrument, latency (delay) can be annoying. MFi and ASHA are fairly low-latency by design. Classic Bluetooth has a bit more delay. If you notice lag, mention it. Sometimes firmware updates improve it.
- **Streaming adjustments:** Within your phone's accessibility settings or the hearing aid app, look for options like "Live Listen" (on iPhone, this turns your phone into a remote mic streaming to the aids) or "Media routing." Make sure calls are routed to your hearing aids if you want that, so you don't need to hold the phone to your ear at all. On iPhone, after pairing, you can set audio routing to "Always Hearing Devices" so calls and VoiceOver consistently go to your aids.
- **Voice pickup:** Some hearing aids with built-in mics allow hands-free calling via certain phones. If not, you may still need to speak into the phone's mic. Know how your aids handle phone calls so you don't unknowingly mute yourself.
- **Traditional phone use:** If you sometimes hold a phone to your ear instead of streaming the call, ask your audiologist to show you the best placement. With RIC and BTE hearing aids, the clearest spot is often slightly above or behind the ear canal opening so the phone aligns better with the hearing aid microphones rather than pressing directly over the ear. This can feel awkward at first, but it often improves clarity and reduces feedback.

Bottom line: Take advantage of connectivity. It can make using technology much more accessible. If you're unsure how to connect or whether your hearing aids can do it, ask your audiologist (and insist on a demo). The ability to pair with smartphones and computers is more than a luxury; for many blind users it means being able to hear a screen reader in a noisy area, enjoy podcasts without cranking up external speakers, and use features like phone call audio and turn-by-turn navigation prompts spoken right into your ear. It's a level of direct access you really don't want to miss out on.

External Microphones: Expanding Your Hearing Range and Spatial Awareness

Hearing aids alone have limited range. If the person you need to hear is far away or in a large boardroom, even the best aids might not clarify their voice. That's where external wireless microphones come in. These are accessories you or others can wear, or place on a table, that stream sound directly into your hearing aids, greatly improving speech clarity in challenging situations. They can be transformative for blind users, because they not only boost the voice you want to hear; some can also preserve spatial cues that help you work out who's talking and where they are.

Common types of external mics:

- **Clip-on or lapel mics:** You give a tiny clip-on mic to a speaker (say, a lecturer or your companion at a noisy event). Their voice is picked up and sent straight to your aids, cutting through distance and noise.

- **Conference or table mics:** You place it in the middle of a meeting table; it uses multiple microphones to pick up speech from all around and streams it to you.
- **Pendant/handheld mics:** Some devices can be pointed at the person you want to hear, or passed around among speakers.

A popular line of such accessories is the Phonak Roger range (Roger Pen, Roger Select, and the latest Roger On), which can perform all these functions in one device. The Roger app is also fully accessible, facilitating control of the accessory from your smartphone. Other hearing aid brands have their own versions (ReSound Multi Mic, Oticon ConnectClip, Starkey Table Mic, etc.), though many of those stream mono audio. The Roger On is particularly noteworthy for blind users because of a specific feature:

Roger On's Stereo Mode: The Roger On has a setting called StereoZoom, or stereo wide pointing mode. In this mode, if you place the mic in the middle of a group discussion (or use it in a certain orientation), it **preserves some stereo separation in the sound before sending it to your hearing aids.** Practically, this means if someone on your left speaks, you hear them more in your left aid; someone on your right, more in the right. This can **help you sense where each voice is located,** which is significant for spatial awareness in meetings. In a roundtable discussion you'd have an easier time turning toward the person speaking because the sound itself cues their position.

Note: As of now, Roger On is unique in offering a true stereo transmitted signal among widely-used remote mics. Other microphones generally mix everything into one channel. If other manufacturers introduce a similar feature, be sure to ask about it. Roger technology is a bit pricey, but many find it invaluable.

How external mics benefit you:

- **Extending hearing distance:** You can hear a person across a big conference room as if they were next to you, because the mic near them sends their voice right into your ear. No more struggling when the speaker is too far for your hearing aids' own mics.
- **Improving signal-to-noise:** In noisy places or reverberant halls, an external mic cuts through the clutter. Blind users often attend conferences or lectures where PA systems might not be clear. Placing your mic at the podium, or plugging into the provided assistive transmitter, can make a world of difference.
- **Group conversations:** Technologies like Roger On use MultiBeam arrays to identify who's talking and focus on that voice. This means if people around a table take turns, it will help emphasise whichever direction the current talker is coming from, enabling you to follow conversations with multiple participants more easily.
- **One-on-one in motion:** If you're walking with a guide or friend in a noisy city, you could have them wear a clip-on mic. Their voice will come directly to your ears over the traffic din. Many blind people find this extremely helpful for communication with sighted guides in loud environments.

To use these mics, your hearing aids need to be compatible. Some use telecoil receivers, but most modern ones use 2.4 GHz or proprietary radio. For example, Roger mics require either built-in Roger receivers in the aids or an external boot/receiver. Consult your audiologist; they may need to activate the feature on your aids and pair the devices.

Do not be afraid to disclose your needs so they can be met. At a meeting, for example, you could briefly explain and hand the speaker your mic so they understand why you need it and how to use it

("Please wear this mic so I can hear you clearly."). Most people are happy to cooperate when they understand the purpose.

Other features to look for:

- **Multiple mic modes:** Roger On, for example, can be handheld and pointed at a speaker, or set on a table (and it auto-switches mode), or even used as a wired TV transmitter with a dock. This versatility is handy. The dock can even be connected to a computer's headphone jack for low-latency access to your screen reader.
- **Stereo vs mono:** As discussed, stereo is beneficial. If using other mics (mono), you will not get localization through the mic itself. However, you can often compensate. If you only mic one person (like a lecturer), you know where they are; if it is a table mic mixing voices, you will still hear who is speaking more clearly, even if you will need other context to identify them.
- **Connectivity to computer/phone:** Some remote mics can double as a wireless streamer for your computer or phone. If you don't have direct Bluetooth in your aids, a device like ConnectClip or Roger On can act as a middleman (receiving Bluetooth from PC/phone and relaying to your aids). This might kill two birds with one stone: assistive listening in meetings and personal device streaming.

Checking the Accessibility of Accessory Controls

When evaluating hearing aids and their accessories, one aspect that doesn't always get the attention it deserves is the accessibility of the physical controls on the accessory itself. This matters because an accessory you can't independently operate is an accessory that creates dependence on others.

Consider the difference between a sliding switch and a push button. A sliding switch, like the one found on the Roger On, tells you by touch exactly where it is in its travel. You can feel whether it's in the on or off position without pressing anything or consulting an app. A push button, by contrast, gives you no tactile information about the current state. You press it and something happens, but there's typically no reliable way of knowing whether the accessory turned on or turned off without some other form of feedback. Some accessories do provide an audio cue for this, which helps. Others do not, leaving you to guess.

Some accessories go further in the wrong direction and replace physical buttons entirely with flush touch-sensitive surfaces. These can be difficult or impossible to use reliably by touch alone, since there's no physical distinction between a control and the case surrounding it.

When you are evaluating hearing aids, remember that the whole ecosystem matters, not just the aids themselves. The accessories that go with them, including external microphones, streamers, and TV accessories, will be part of your daily life. Ask specifically: how will I know whether this accessory is on or off? Does it have physical controls I can feel? What audio or tactile feedback does it provide? If a supplier isn't sure of the answer, ask to handle the accessory before you buy. A great hearing aid paired with inaccessible accessories can undermine your independence in ways that are easy to overlook until you're already committed.

The same question applies to carrying cases and charging cradles for accessories: are they straightforward to operate by touch, or do they have small latches or fiddly connectors that will frustrate you on a daily basis? These details are worth checking.

Watching TV and Other Media with Your Hearing Aids

Television is one of the areas where hearing loss and hearing aids intersect most noticeably in everyday life. The challenge is familiar: the volume level that works well for you might not suit others

in the room, and turning the TV up isn't always an option. Fortunately, there are several good solutions, and the technology in this area keeps improving.

TV Accessories

Hearing aid TV accessories are small transmitters that sit near your television and stream its audio directly to your hearing aids over a wireless connection. You hear the audio at whatever level you need, without the television itself needing to be loud. Everyone else in the room hears the TV at a normal volume; you hear it as if you're sitting right next to the speaker.

How they work: The accessory plugs into your TV's audio output, which might be a headphone jack, an optical audio port, or a digital connection, and pairs wirelessly with your hearing aids. Most major hearing aid brands offer their own version. Phonak has the TV Connector, ReSound has the TV Streamer, Oticon has the TV Adapter, and Starkey has its own option. While they differ in detail, they all serve the same basic purpose. Your audiologist can advise which is compatible with your aids and how to set it up.

Using TV Accessories with Computers and Other Devices

It is worth knowing that TV accessories are not only useful for watching television. Because they transmit audio from any device plugged into them, many can also work with a desktop or laptop computer. If you connect one to your computer's headphone or audio output port, it can stream your screen reader speech directly to your hearing aids. This can be more convenient than relying on Bluetooth from the PC, particularly if your aids don't support direct computer Bluetooth connections or if you'd like a simple, always-on solution.

Similarly, other audio devices can feed through a TV accessory and into your ears. If you use a Victor Reader Stream for audiobooks or podcasts, you can plug it into the accessory's input and hear playback directly through your aids. A radio, a dedicated audio player, or any device with an audio output can potentially work in the same way. If you enjoy a quieter, more private listening setup while reading or working at your desk, a TV accessory can be a surprisingly practical option worth discussing with your audiologist.

Direct Pairing with Smart TVs and Set-Top Boxes

The good news is that the landscape is changing for the better. A growing number of modern smart televisions and set-top boxes now support direct Bluetooth pairing with hearing aids, which means you may not need a separate accessory at all. Manufacturers including Samsung and LG have been expanding these features across their TV ranges, and streaming devices are beginning to follow.

When you're thinking about buying a new television, it's worth asking the retailer or checking the specifications to see whether it supports hearing aid pairing. In some cases, this will be listed as "Bluetooth hearing aid support" or "accessibility audio" in the product documentation. If your aids support Bluetooth LE Audio, this compatibility will only become more common and more reliable over the next few years.

The practical advantage of direct pairing is simplicity. There's no extra device to plug in, no battery to charge, and no accessory to set up. The TV and your aids communicate directly, just as your phone does. For those who prefer a cleaner setup, or who find extra accessories harder to manage, this is a welcome development.

A Note on Accessory Controls

The point made earlier about accessibility of controls applies just as much to TV accessories as it does to external microphones. Some TV accessories have clear physical switches or buttons with

audio feedback. Others have flush touch-sensitive surfaces or indicator lights that tell you very little without sight.

Before committing to a particular hearing aid ecosystem, ask about the TV accessory that goes with it and, if possible, try it. Can you tell by touch whether it's on or off? Does it confirm this with a sound? If you're relying on the accessory every evening to watch television or listen to your screen reader, you need to be able to operate it confidently and independently. This is exactly the kind of practical detail that a good audiologist, or a peer who has already tried the equipment, can help you check.

Section 3: Future and Timeless Tech of the Audio World

Auracast and the Future of Broadcast Audio for the Blind

There's a new buzzword in the wireless audio world: Auracast. It's part of the latest Bluetooth LE Audio technology and it's essentially Bluetooth broadcasting.

What is Auracast? It's a feature that allows an audio source to stream to *many* receivers at once, in a secure and controlled way. For example, a TV in an airport gate area could broadcast its audio via Auracast; anyone with Auracast-compatible hearing devices could tap in and listen directly. Unlike classic Bluetooth (which is usually one-to-one, your phone to your hearing aids, or one speaker to one headphone), Auracast is one-to-many. You may have experienced something similar if you've ever used an FM system or an induction loop in a theatre. Auracast aims to do this without special hardware, using the Bluetooth built into phones and hearing devices.

Why it matters for blind users:

- **Access to public audio:** With Auracast, venues can broadcast audio directly to your hearing aids. This could include the audio from a PA system, live announcements, or an audio description track for a movie or play. Instead of borrowing a specialised receiver or making sure you sit in the right spot for a hearing loop, you might simply select the signal on your phone or hearing aid and get that audio feed. Essentially, any place with a sound system could become directly accessible.
- **Better quality and privacy:** Compared to current solutions (like asking for a handheld receiver at a museum or switching your aids to telecoil in a loop), Auracast would use the digital link you already have. That means possibly higher clarity and stereo sound, and it's a private experience. There's no need for additional equipment hanging around your neck.
- **Low latency:** Auracast via Bluetooth LE is designed to be low-latency. This is crucial for live events. You don't want the sound in your ear lagging behind what's happening. Low latency means the audio should be in sync.
- **Could replace or augment hearing loops:** Hearing loops (telecoil systems) are wonderful and will be around for a long time, but they require infrastructure (wires in the building) and only serve people with telecoils. Auracast could cover anyone with a smartphone, earbud, or hearing aid that supports it, making it a more universally accessible solution. For the blind community, that means you're not limited to venues that installed a loop. As long as a place uses Auracast, you can benefit from it just like any other patron with hearing loss.
- **Personal triggers:** In the future, one can imagine audio signs or beacons. For example, a bus could emit an Auracast stream that labels the route number and destination, so when you approach the bus stop, your phone or hearing aids can pick up "Route 10, Downtown Express" being broadcast. This is speculative, but the technology would allow it, similar to how some apps use Bluetooth beacons to give location-based information.

The rollout of Auracast is just beginning (as of 2026). It requires two things: devices that can receive it (newer hearing aids and phones) and broadcasters to actually deploy it in public spaces. The

Bluetooth SIG (the body that governs Bluetooth standards) is enthusiastic about it, but adoption will take time. It's very likely that in the next few years you'll see Auracast used in airports, theatres, conference centres, and museums, complementing or replacing older assistive listening systems.

How to prepare:

- When you get new hearing aids, ask if they will support Bluetooth LE Audio/Auracast. Some models in 2024 to 2025 started including the hardware, and firmware updates could activate it. Being ready means you can tap into these broadcasts as they become available.
- Participate in advocacy. The blind and hearing loss communities can encourage venues to adopt these technologies. Just as we've advocated for hearing loops and captioning systems, we can advocate for Auracast in public infrastructure. It helps that it's not just for disabled users; even mainstream audiences might use it, for instance to tune in to a silent TV at a gym.

Telecoil and Hearing Loop Systems: Timeless Tech Still Matters

While shiny new tech like Auracast is emerging, telecoils (T-coils) and hearing loops are existing, reliable solutions that you should absolutely utilise if you have access. Many hearing aids, especially larger styles like BTEs and some custom ITEs, come with an embedded telecoil. It's a tiny coil of wire that can pick up magnetic signals from compatible sound systems.

What is a telecoil? It's an old but effective technology: when you switch your hearing aid to "T" (telecoil) mode, the hearing aid's microphone may turn off (so it stops listening to ambient sound) and instead it listens for a magnetic signal. **Hearing loop systems** (also called induction loops) transmit audio via a magnetic field that telecoil-equipped hearing aids can receive. Common places you'll find hearing loops: auditoriums, theatres, places of worship, bank teller windows, lecture halls, airports (at some service counters), and even some mass transit vehicles or stations. These systems are often marked by the **universal symbol of an ear with a "T"** on signage.

Why loops are great for blind users:

- **They pipe sound directly to your hearing aid,** vastly improving clarity.
- **No extra equipment needed** (aside from your hearing aids). Unlike FM or IR systems where you'd have to borrow a receiver and wear headphones or a neckloop, with a telecoil you are the receiver. Your hearing aids are already personalised to your loss, so you get sound adjusted to your needs.
- **Easy to use (once you know how):** Typically, you'll have a program slot for "Telecoil" or "MT" (Mic+Telecoil). In "T" only mode, you hear solely the loop; in "MT" mode, you hear loop plus a bit of the microphone (so you can still hear people around you). You might prefer MT mode so you don't feel completely isolated from ambient sound. Work with your audiologist to decide how your telecoil program should function.

Don't forget to ask for and activate the telecoil! Some newer miniaturised aids or very small rechargeable models may omit a T-coil for size reasons. If having access to loops is important (and it usually is), **make sure your hearing aids have telecoils built in.** If not, you can sometimes use a telecoil accessory or neckloop with a streamer, but that's an added complexity. Fortunately, many hearing aids do include them. If you have them, test them out at known loop locations.

Using telecoil in daily life: Beyond public venues, telecoils can also help with phone calls on landline phones. Many landline phones are "hearing aid compatible"; they produce a magnetic signal that your T-coil can pick up when you hold the phone to your ear. This can give you feedback-free, clear phone audio. On mobile phones, it is less common to use T-coil since we have Bluetooth now, but some smartphones still have a magnetic coupling for hearing aids if you prefer that. Telecoils are

also useful for people who work in secure facilities where Bluetooth is not permitted. In those settings, a neckloop or a behind-the-neck or over-the-ear induction accessory can still provide direct audio access without needing a wireless Bluetooth connection.

Another useful trick: you can use a personal neckloop connected to any audio device as a simple DIY wireless solution. For example, plug a neckloop into an airplane's headphone jack; hang the loop around your neck, and switch your aids to T. You'll hear the movie audio in your aids. This is a handy alternative if you don't have Bluetooth streaming on your aids.

Some users also prefer alternatives to a traditional neckloop, such as over-the-ear induction accessories worn closer to the hearing aids. Because they sit nearer to the microphones or telecoil pickup, they may provide a stronger signal in some situations. If you are interested in this kind of setup, ask your audiologist about available compatible accessories.

When you activate your telecoil in a looped venue, the improvement can be almost shockingly clear. You won't hear the rustle of programmes or coughs; just the spoken word or music from the stage, as if you're plugged straight into the sound system. Users often describe it as "like magic." If you find the sound a bit unnatural (because it lacks the acoustics of the room), you can blend in some mic input (the "M" part of an MT program) to get ambient sound for context.

Google Maps even has a feature where accessibility attributes note if a location has an assistive hearing loop, which can be handy when you're planning a visit somewhere new.

Note: In very large venues or when moving around (like an exhibit floor), loops work within a certain area (typically the looped room). If you wander out of the loop, you lose the signal. Plan to sit or stand within the looped area (often the main seating). Some places mark the best reception zones.

In summary, the telecoil is a small feature with a big impact. It's an older technology but remains extremely relevant. Use it wherever possible. It can significantly reduce listening effort in public settings by delivering crystal-clear sound. If your aids don't have one and you struggle in places that could benefit from loops, consider upgrading when you can, or using alternate devices. And remember: as great as high-tech Bluetooth is, telecoils don't require pairing or battery drain. They're passive and always listening for a loop. A trusty tool in your toolkit.

Section 4: Over-the-Counter Hearing Aids: Knowing Your Options

In October 2022, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) created a new category of hearing aids that adults could buy directly, without a prescription, a medical exam, or a visit to an audiologist. These over-the-counter (OTC) hearing aids have grown into a substantial market, with options ranging from inexpensive preset devices to sophisticated self-fitting aids that rival the technology of some prescription models. They have made hearing help more affordable and accessible for millions of people, and if you have mild to moderate hearing loss, they are worth understanding. However, as with so many things in life, the picture for blind people is more nuanced than it might first appear.

What OTC Hearing Aids Are and Who They Are For

OTC hearing aids are intended only for adults 18 and older with perceived mild to moderate hearing loss. This is not a small caveat; it is a hard boundary. If your hearing loss is severe or profound, OTC aids are not designed for you and will almost certainly not provide enough amplification. The FDA's own guidance is clear on this. For people in that category, prescription hearing aids fitted by a professional remain the only appropriate route.

Within the mild to moderate range, OTC aids come in two main types. Preset aids offer a small number of fixed programs for common listening situations (quiet, noisy room, TV, and so on) and

allow basic volume adjustment. They are the cheapest option and require the least setup. Self-fitting aids are more sophisticated: they pair with a smartphone app and guide you through a brief hearing test or let you upload an audiogram from your audiologist, then calibrate the device to your individual hearing profile. The FDA requires self-fitting devices to go through clinical trials demonstrating that a consumer can achieve results comparable to an audiologist fitting, which is a meaningful standard. Experts generally recommend self-fitting devices over preset ones for this reason.

The price range is wide. Basic preset aids can be found for under $200, while quality self-fitting aids typically run from $500 to $2,000 per pair. Even at the upper end, this is considerably less than the $3,500 to $7,500 or more that a pair of premium prescription aids from a private audiologist can cost. That price gap is real, and for many people with straightforward mild to moderate hearing loss, well-chosen OTC aids can be genuinely effective.

The Honest Case for Caution as a Blind Person

Here is where we need to be direct with you. The American Academy of Audiology has noted that OTC aids may be a useful first step for some people, but that those with complex medical needs should involve an audiologist in their care. As a blind person, your hearing needs are complex, in ways that go well beyond what most OTC products are designed to address.

Think about everything the earlier sections of this guide have covered: custom outdoor programs to preserve environmental awareness, fine-tuned noise reduction that doesn't filter out the traffic sounds you need for safe navigation, bilateral programming that gives you accurate directional information, integration with screen readers over Bluetooth, real ear measurements to confirm you're getting the right amplification across frequencies. None of that is what OTC devices are built to deliver. A preset OTC aid applies generic amplification. Even a good self-fitting device can personalise the sound profile, but it cannot set up a travel program for crossing streets, configure your aids to mix ambient sound with streaming audio, or coach you through the specific adjustments that make hearing aids work well for a blind person.

There is also the question of the apps. Most OTC hearing aid configuration relies heavily on smartphone apps. Many of these apps have accessibility gaps. Without being able to see the screen, navigating setup menus, adjusting frequency response sliders, or interpreting a self-administered hearing test can be difficult or impossible. This is a meaningful barrier that sighted users simply do not face, and it is rarely acknowledged in OTC hearing aid marketing or reviews. Before purchasing any OTC aid, you would need to thoroughly investigate whether its companion app is fully accessible with your screen reader.

This does not mean OTC aids have no place in your life. But it does mean you should approach them with realistic expectations and without treating them as a substitute for the kind of professionally programmed, purpose-configured prescription hearing care that this guide has been describing. It is especially important to be cautious if you have a history of middle ear problems, ear drainage, repeated ear infections, or other outer or middle ear disease. In those situations, placing an amplification device in the ear canal without professional guidance may be inappropriate or even harmful, and discussion with an audiologist or other qualified hearing professional is strongly recommended.

AirPods Pro as Hearing Aids: The Accessible Exception

There is one OTC option that deserves specific attention for blind iPhone users: Apple's AirPods Pro. In late 2024, Apple received FDA clearance to market the AirPods Pro 2's Hearing Aid feature as an OTC hearing aid. The AirPods Pro 3, released in September 2025, carries forward the same hearing health functionality with a battery life of up to 10 hours in hearing aid mode. Both models are intended for adults with perceived mild to moderate hearing loss.

What makes this particularly significant for blind users is the accessibility of the entire process. Apple designed the setup to work fully with VoiceOver from start to finish.

The setup works like this: you put your AirPods in, open the Settings app, and launch the hearing test. The test takes about five minutes, plays tones at different volumes and frequencies, and asks you to tap when you hear them. Your AirPods then use the results to calibrate how they process and amplify sound around you. If you already have an audiogram from your audiologist, you can skip the in-app test entirely and upload those results directly into the Apple Health app using your device's camera. Either way, the amplification is personalised to your specific hearing profile rather than using generic settings.

Once set up, the Hearing Aid feature adjusts amplification, balance, and tone. It also ties into features you may already use: Conversation Boost uses the directional beamforming microphones to focus on the person in front of you, which can be very useful in meetings or one-on-one conversations. Settings are stored on the AirPods themselves, so if your iPhone isn't nearby, your hearing aid settings remain active. You can also make quick adjustments from Control Center, which is accessible via VoiceOver like any other control. Swipe-to-adjust amplification is available from the AirPods' touch controls when in Transparency mode.

There are some real limitations to be honest about. AirPods Pro are earbuds, not traditional hearing aids, and all-day wear comfort is a genuine question for some people. They are more visible than most hearing aids. The feature requires an iPhone or iPad running iOS 18 or later; there is no Android support, and availability varies by country. Like all OTC devices, this is designed only for mild to moderate hearing loss. And while the accessibility of setup is excellent, the lack of professional programming means the same limitations apply as with any OTC device: no custom programs for outdoor travel, no audiologist relationship, no real ear verification.

If fit is a concern, it may be possible to get custom earmolds or custom sleeves made by an audiologist or earmold lab for AirPods Pro. These can improve retention and comfort for some users, although they add cost and may require removal before charging depending on the design.

The cost argument is compelling. AirPods Pro are among the least expensive FDA-cleared self-fitting hearing aids available. If you already own a pair, or are considering them anyway for VoiceOver and general iPhone use, the hearing aid functionality is essentially included. For someone with mild to moderate hearing loss who already lives in Apple's ecosystem, this is worth taking seriously as a starting point, while keeping in mind that you may eventually want to move to purpose-built prescription hearing aids as your needs or hearing loss evolve.

Name-Brand OTC Models: Tempting, but Read the Fine Print

You may have heard that some name-brand hearing aid manufacturers offer versions of their products at lower prices, positioned as OTC alternatives. The appeal is obvious: familiar technology at a fraction of the cost. But this is where you need to read carefully.

The key issue is not the hardware; it is the fitting. A hearing aid that is technically the same platform as a prescription model but sold without professional programming is not the same hearing aid in any way that matters to a blind person. You are getting the platform without the configuration. The custom programs, the real ear measurements, the outdoor awareness settings, the streaming mix ratios, the bilateral coordination tuning; all of that lives in the professional fitting, not in the hardware itself. Buying the OTC version of a name-brand aid and fitting it yourself gives you a generic amplifier in an expensive shell.

That said, there are people for whom mild, straightforward hearing loss means that a self-fitting OTC version of a quality product works well. The point is not that it's never appropriate, but that for

someone whose hearing forms such a critical part of navigating the world independently, accepting a generic configuration is a meaningful compromise.

Costco: A Middle Ground Worth Knowing About

Costco occupies an interesting middle ground that is genuinely worth discussing, because it offers something most OTC options don't: professional fitting at significantly lower prices than private audiology practices.

Costco has become the largest hearing aid retailer in the United States, accounting for roughly 16% of the retail market as of 2025. The reason is straightforward: its purchasing volume allows it to drive prices down significantly and pass the savings to members. Hearing aids at Costco typically cost 30 to 65% less than the same or equivalent technology at a private audiology clinic, with prices generally ranging from around $1,400 to $3,000 per pair. Customer satisfaction rates are comparable to those of private practices.

Critically for our purposes, Costco hearing aid purchases come with professional support: a hearing test, fitting, and programming by a licensed hearing professional, along with free follow-up appointments and cleanings. The hearing aid is programmed to your audiogram, not left for you to configure yourself. That makes Costco fundamentally different from a typical OTC purchase. You are buying prescription-grade hearing aids with professional fitting at a lower price point, not a self-serve consumer product.

Current brands at Costco include Rexton, Jabra, and Philips. Sonova, which is the parent company of Phonak, reestablished its partnership with Costco and now offers hearing aids under the Sennheiser brand at Costco locations. The Sennheiser Sonite R, priced around $1,500 to $1,700 at Costco, is built on the same platform as Phonak's Lumity line. It supports hands-free calls on both iPhone and Android, has AI-powered automatic features, and is compatible with accessories including the TV Connector and PartnerMic. For context, the equivalent-tier Phonak product at a private audiologist would often cost considerably more.

Costco also offers a generous 180-day return policy (which some locations extend) and loss and damage coverage, which addresses one of the concerns people sometimes have about buying more affordable aids.

There are some genuine caveats. The professional on duty at a Costco hearing centre is sometimes a licensed hearing aid specialist rather than a Doctor of Audiology, and the quality of care can vary considerably between locations. Some Costco locations have excellent audiologists who perform real ear measurements and provide outstanding follow-up care. Others may not. You'll need to research what's available at your local Costco and possibly ask what credentials the fitter holds and whether they perform real ear measurements. The selection of aids is also more limited than at a private clinic. And Costco does not accept insurance, so if you have coverage that applies to hearing aids, you should check whether you'd be better off at a provider your insurance works with.

For a blind person who needs professional programming but is looking to reduce costs, Costco represents a worthwhile option to investigate, particularly if you can find a location with a skilled audiologist. It is not the same as a dedicated audiology practice with a professional who specialises in working with blind patients, but it is substantially better than a pure self-fit OTC product. If you go this route, use the advice in the Working with Audiologists section of this guide to communicate your specific needs just as you would with any hearing professional.

Our Overall Take on OTC Options

OTC hearing aids have genuinely expanded access to hearing help, and that is a good thing. For someone with mild to moderate hearing loss who primarily needs better speech clarity in everyday situations, the right OTC product can be effective and affordable.

For most blind hearing aid users, though, the calculus is different. Your hearing does more than help you understand speech; it helps you navigate, stay safe, use your technology, and engage with the world. The professional relationship with an audiologist who understands your needs, the custom programming that preserves your environmental awareness, and the ongoing support that lets you fine-tune your aids as situations change, all of that has real value that is hard to replicate with a consumer product, however sophisticated.

The nuanced advice, then, is this: AirPods Pro are worth considering if you have mild to moderate hearing loss and already use an iPhone, because the accessible setup and the familiar ecosystem make them a genuinely usable option. Costco is worth considering if cost is a significant barrier and you can find a location with a skilled professional who will program your aids properly. For everything else in the OTC market, proceed with considerable caution and a clear understanding of what you would be giving up.

Whatever route you explore, never skip the step of getting a proper hearing test first. Knowing your audiogram, understanding the nature of your hearing loss across frequencies, and having that data available gives you a foundation for any decision you make, whether you end up at a private audiologist, a Costco hearing centre, or holding a pair of AirPods Pro.

Section 5: People and Places to Know and Go

Working with Audiologists: Communicating Your Unique Needs

Now that we've introduced you to some of the technology that's out there, let's talk about partnering with your audiologist so you have what you need, configured optimally. The relationship between you and your audiologist is a critical one, particularly since you are reliant on your hearing.

Not all audiologists are familiar with the specific needs of blind or deafblind patients. We have produced this guide so that you can confidently advocate for your needs and be informed about the options available to you. Here are important points to convey to your audiologist:

"I rely on hearing for much more than speech." From the very first appointment, let them know you are blind (if they don't already) and that **sound provides even more essential information for you than it does for others.** Explain that you need to hear environmental cues (like approaching cars, changes in room acoustics, footsteps) and that any hearing solution must preserve as much of that awareness as possible. Some well-meaning audiologists might initially program the hearing aids to aggressively suppress background noise for comfort, not realising that for you, that "background noise" might be crucial information. Make it clear that you prioritise awareness over comfort in many cases. For instance, you might say: "I actually want to hear the HVAC hum or traffic noise when I'm out. I use those sounds to orient myself. So please keep some low-frequency sounds audible." The audiologist can adjust the noise reduction strength and frequency response accordingly.

Hands-on orientation: Because you cannot see visual indicators on the aids (like tiny LEDs or the screen of a programming interface), ask the audiologist to **give you audible or tactile references.** For example:

- **Beep patterns and voice prompts:** Many hearing aids have different beep patterns to denote low battery, program changes, or volume limit. Ensure your audiologist enables these and describes them to you. There's often an option in the software to turn on voice prompts (for

example, a pleasant voice that says "Battery low" or "Program 2"). If available, have them enable those voice prompts. They can be incredibly helpful.

- **Physical familiarisation:** Have the audiologist physically show you the aid: the location of the microphone ports, the battery door or charging contacts, any pushbuttons or toggle switches. Actually feel them yourself. Discuss how you'll know the aid is on or off. Some aids play a start-up jingle when turned on. If not, ask if they can enable a power-on indicator sound.
- **Modes and programs:** If your aids have a telecoil or directional mic mode, ask how to activate it and if there is a way to tell by touch or sound which mode you are in. Some aids beep once for program 1, twice for program 2, and so on. Make sure you know those and can distinguish them. If the default beeps are too subtle, ask the audiologist to switch to voice prompts.

Programming considerations:

- **Noise settings:** "Let's not max out the noise reduction, especially in any program I'll use outdoors." You might want a special program for travel with minimal noise reduction. Ensure they set that up for you.
- **Directionality:** "I need to hear all around me when moving. So I'd like an omnidirectional setting I can use." Audiologists often default to automatic directionality which focuses ahead in noise. Request that in your "walking outside" program they fix it to surround sound.
- **Volume control and limits:** If you need extra boost occasionally, ask them to enable manual volume control (via a button or app) and not to restrict it too tightly. Also, they can configure how many steps the volume control has. If you want fine control, they can increase the number of steps.
- **Verification:** During the fitting, they'll probably do Real Ear Measurements (REM) to ensure you're getting appropriate amplification. Pay attention to how things sound and speak up if something seems off. For example, if high-frequency sounds are very sharp or painful, mention it; they can adjust that frequency range. Or if soft sounds still seem too soft, they can add gain for soft inputs. **Your feedback is crucial.**

Accessibility of hearing aid apps and tools: If your aids come with a smartphone app or desktop software for adjustments:

- **Screen reader compatibility:** Explain that you use a screen reader (VoiceOver on iPhone, TalkBack on Android, Narrator/JAWS/NVDA on PC). If the audiologist is not familiar, be prepared to demonstrate or explain how you operate your phone non-visually.
- **Ask about app accessibility:** Ask if the hearing aid's mobile app is known to be accessible. Some manufacturers do a better job than others. The audiologist might not know the answer. The email list operated by the National Federation of the Blind's Deafblind Division is also a handy resource, because others may have already tried the app and can comment on accessibility along with tips and tricks for effective use. If the app isn't fully accessible, ask about older remote controls or alternative methods to change settings.
- **Don't hesitate to push back:** Say something like "The app has unlabelled buttons that my iPhone can't read, so I struggle to use it. Is there a workaround?" This might prompt them to give feedback to the manufacturer as well. And do not hesitate to state that the aid will not work out for you if the app is too inaccessible. Insist on another brand if necessary.
- **Pre-set workarounds:** If you discover an accessibility issue (like an app setting you can't use), the audiologist might be able to pre-set those features for you so you don't need to adjust them often.

Emphasise safety and situational awareness: Many audiologists focus on improving speech understanding in quiet and noise, which is great, but they might not consider that **as a blind person you need to hear things like crosswalk beeps, cars, and people approaching.** Share specific examples: "Sometimes the hearing aid cuts off soft background noise; but I need to hear those when walking. Please ensure my default settings still let me hear the traffic flow." They can adjust compression or ambient mic settings.

If you have any residual vision, mention whether you can detect colour or contrast, because some providers put a coloured dot on aids to mark left from right (typically red for right, blue for left). If you can't see colour, ask for a tactile bump on one side or a braille label on the case. If the audiologist gives you print materials (like how to care for the aids), request digital copies you can read with a screen reader, or ask them to walk you verbally through the guide.

Training and practice: Ensure the audiologist gives you ample practice inserting and removing the aids, changing batteries (if applicable) or using the charger, and cleaning them. A tip from blind users: use a **lap tray or do tasks over a table** so if you drop a small battery or even the aid, it does not hit the floor (and possibly bounce away). Let the audiologist know you will do that at home, so any small tools they give you (like a wax removal brush) you will manage with a tactile strategy. Maybe ask for extra tools in case you lose one.

Deafblind users: If you have significant hearing and vision loss combined, you may rely on vibratory alerts. There are no common hearing aids with vibration, but some accessories (like certain alarm clocks or the Apple Watch) use vibration. Discuss how you'll handle things like a beeping battery warning if you can't hear it. For example, you could use a smartphone linked to your hearing aid that pops up a spoken notification of low battery, or a smartwatch that vibrates when your hearing aid app indicates low battery.

After initial fitting, you'll likely have a follow-up in a week or two. Many hearing aids now support remote appointments with your audiologist. This can be very useful if you have an audiologist who is willing to respond quickly to requests for minor adjustments, or if the cost of transportation is a barrier to visiting regularly. In your follow-up, come prepared with notes:

- What situations worked well?
- Where did you still struggle?
- Did any features annoy you (like too much wind noise, or were the aids whistling when you used the phone, etc.)?

A great strategy is to keep a small notetaker or use a notes app with dictation to log experiences while they're fresh. Then you can relay: "When I was at a noisy café, I tried Program 2 and it helped with voices, but I also found I couldn't hear the barista behind me at all. Maybe the focus was too narrow." Or "When crossing 5th and Main, I could hear the cars better with Program 3; that's good." This feedback lets the audiologist fine-tune. They might widen the directional mic focus if it was too pinpoint, or adjust the gain on certain frequencies.

Building a relationship: Let your audiologist know that you welcome their expertise, but also that you are an expert when it comes to your needs as a blind person and will be an active participant in the process. A good audiologist will appreciate that. It leads to better outcomes. If you encounter one who is dismissive of your input or seems unfamiliar with your needs, consider finding a different audiologist if you can. Your hearing is too important to settle for second best.

Other professionals: If you're working with a blindness specialist such as a travel instructor, consider involving them too. They might communicate with your audiologist about sound cues you need for travel and daily life, reinforcing what you've said. A travel instructor, for example, could

explain to an audiologist how you use traffic surge sounds to time street crossings, so the audiologist realises how essential low-frequency hearing is for you.

In summary, the audiologist's goal is to customise the technology for your life. And you have some unique requirements. Clear, assertive communication is key. Don't leave the appointment with unanswered questions or unspoken concerns. If, for instance, you're unsure how you'll tell when your batteries die, ask: "What can we do so I know when the battery is low?" They might respond: "Your aids will play a melody," to which you can say: "Okay, play that for me now so I know what it sounds like." Always test it out in the office.

Remember, you are the expert on living day-to-day as a blind person; they are the expert on audiology. When both sets of expertise are combined, you'll achieve the best result. A hearing solution tailored to you. One that helps you hear better without undermining your independence. Most audiologists truly want that for you, and with your guidance, they can help you get there.

Requesting Assistive Listening Devices in Public Venues

Even with top-notch hearing aids and personal accessories, there will be times you need a little extra help in public spaces. Many auditoriums, conference centres, movie theatres, places of worship, and civic centres offer Assistive Listening Devices (ALDs) to patrons with hearing impairments. As a blind person who's also hard of hearing, you should absolutely feel entitled to use these. Do not be shy about asking for them. They exist for your benefit, and often, if you don't ask, they won't be offered.

Types of ALDs you might encounter:

- **Hearing loop systems (induction loops):** We covered this above. If the venue has a loop, you just switch your hearing aid to T-coil mode. This is the simplest scenario as there's nothing to borrow.
- **Infrared (IR) systems:** These involve a headset or receiver that picks up infrared signals carrying the audio. IR requires line-of-sight; you need to be in view of the IR transmitter, usually at the front of the hall.
- **FM/DM systems:** A radio frequency system where you're given a pocket receiver and either an earphone, headset, or a neckloop to send to your hearing aid's telecoil.
- **Personal PA solutions:** Some places might simply offer a small personal amplifier or even a smart app to stream audio to your phone.

Under laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), many public assembly areas are **required** to provide some form of assistive listening for people with hearing loss. For example, any new theatre or renovated space is likely to have either a loop or an FM/IR system installed to meet these requirements. It's often written in event brochures or announced before a show that such devices are available: "Please see an usher for assistive listening devices." But if it's not mentioned, ask anyway! It might be available on request.

How to request and use ALDs:

- **Arrive a bit early** if you plan to request an ALD, so venue staff have time to fetch it and show you how it works before the event starts. You can say something like: "Hi, I use hearing aids and would like to use any assistive listening system you have. Do you have a hearing loop or listening devices?" The staff might not know the term "loop" but they'll recognise "assistive listening device" or even just "device for hearing impaired."
- **If they have a loop,** they might simply say "Yes, the venue is looped; switch your hearing aid to T-coil." Problem solved.
- **If they hand you a receiver** (common with FM/IR), you might get it with a single earbud or dual headphones. If you prefer to patch it into your hearing aids, ask if they have a neckloop

attachment. A neckloop plugs into the receiver's headphone jack and transmits the audio to your telecoil, so you listen through your hearing aids rather than generic headphones. Many places have neckloops on hand. If they give you headphones and you don't want to remove your hearing aids to use them, speak up and explain you'd like the neckloop for use with your aids' T-coil.

- Don't worry about a deposit or ID. Larger venues might ask to hold an ID while you borrow the device; others don't. It's usually free of charge.
- **Using the device:** If it's FM/IR, find the volume knob and adjust to a comfortable level once the programme starts. If using a neckloop, remember to switch your aids to T mode. If something isn't working (no sound, interference, etc.), return to staff and ask for help or a different unit. Common pitfalls include dead batteries in loaner receivers (ask for a new battery or device) or being out of range (move to a seat where reception is clearer).

Connecting to Community: National Federation of the Blind Deaf-Blind Division

No one understands the challenges and solutions for living with hearing loss as a blind person better than people who share that experience. While professionals provide medical and technical help, peer support and advocacy organisations offer something equally important: practical tips, emotional support, and a collective voice to push for better accessibility. One such resource is the NFB DeafBlind Division.

What is the NFB DeafBlind Division? We are proudly part of the National Federation of the Blind which advances the lives of its members and all blind people in the United States. As a division of the Federation, we focus on advancing the lives of our members and all blind people who have hearing loss. You can connect, share experiences, and advocate for improvements in technology and policy. Members discuss all aspects of life with dual sensory loss, from the best mobile apps to strategies for hiring support service providers (SSPs), to lobbying for accommodations. Learn more at nfbdeafblind.org.

How to get in touch:

The NFB DeafBlind Division runs an email mailing list (NFB-DB). You can subscribe to this list and join conversations with others like you. To subscribe, send an email to **nfb-db@nfbnet.org** or visit the NFB-DB list info page online. Once subscribed, you can send and receive emails to the group. People discuss technology questions, announce events (like workshops or retreats for Deafblind individuals), and offer support.

Conclusion: Live the life you want

Living as a blind person who wears hearing aids presents a blend of challenges, from managing technology to advocating in medical and public settings. But with the right knowledge and support, you can absolutely live the life you want. This guide has covered key points: keep realistic expectations (hearing aids are not perfect, but used wisely they dramatically improve your world); learn and use all the features and accessories that fit your lifestyle (multiple programs, Bluetooth streaming, external mics, telecoils, TV accessories, and more); check that every part of the package, including accessories and their controls, works for you; assert your needs with professionals (audiologists, event organizers); and connect with peers for support and empowerment.

Your journey is personal, but you're not alone. By taking charge of your hearing and leveraging both modern technology and community wisdom, you can maximise your safety, confidence, and enjoyment in daily life.