

# Should I Buy These Hearing Aids Online?

Suzanne H. Kimball, AuD

Denise L. Lux, AuD

Illinois State University


# Agenda



- Review current literature in online hearing aid sales
- Types of online/mail order options
- Describe projects completed at ISU
- Discuss possible dangers in purchasing hearing aids online
- Questions and Answers

# What does the literature tell us?

- Internet purchasing is popular
  - Apparel
  - Electronics
  - Books, gifts, etc.
- What do we know about online hearing aids?
  - 2003-hearing aids purchased online represented about 1% of market share
  - Current data suggests 4-5%
  - Expected to increase as online purchasing increases
  - Legal Precedence: cannot be regulated/controlled on a state level due to federal FDA laws



# How can hearing aids be purchased online/through the mail?

- Several Internet and Mail Order Options
  - Consumer/Patient Referral Sources
  - Marketing/Point of Sale with Face to Face Fitting
  - Direct to Consumer and Mail Order

# Options



- Consumer/Patient Referral Sources

- Consumer is referred to hearing professionals (audiologists or HIS) from a website interaction and/or phone call. The professional registers with a website either free of charge or pays a set fee and receives patient referrals to their practice.

# Options



- Marketing/Point of Sale with Face to Face Fitting
  - Consumer/Patient responds to website and are referred to local hearing professional for services (audiologist or HIS). The hearing aid purchase takes place between the web-based company and the consumer, and the local provider is paid separately for the fitting and follow up services. The fitting fee paid to the professional is based solely on the outcome of the hearing aid sale (some companies offer more reimbursement based on type of hearing aid sold, others have a set fee regardless of type of hearing aid sold).

# Options



- Direct to Consumer and Mail Order

- These companies sell either “one-size-fits-some” ITC, open fit or BTE nonprogrammable hearing aids or programmable digital aids supplied by the manufacturer directly to the consumer.
- Includes no professional services, but may take online hearing test and/or make own earmold impressions.

# Who Can Purchase Online



- Anyone can purchase online if sign medical waiver (over 18)
- Under 18 must have medical consent, however a parent or caregiver would not be prevented from making an online purchase.



# What does the research tell us about internet hearing aids?

- Study #1: Accuracy of online hearing test

- Subjects took hearing test online and in the hearing test suite
- Results suggested that normal subjects were “normal” either way, but those with hearing impairment showed significant differences in amount of hearing loss compared to online test
- Could result in ineffective/dangerous hearing aid fitting

# What does the research tell us about internet hearing aids?

- Study #2: How well can consumers self make earmold impressions?
  - Some could do pretty well, many could not
  - No significance in age
  - Could result in poor fitting hearing aid, making home made impression could be a health risk/danger

# What does the research tell us about internet hearing aids?

- Study #3: Followed 2 consumers through online purchase
  - Results indicated that hearing aids were set way below patient needs
  - Hearing aids selected were inappropriate for one consumer
  - Outcome: poor hearing aid fit, wrong choice of aid results in effective/dangerous fitting

# What does the research tell us about internet hearing aids?

- Study #4: Determining value in traditional versus online hearing aid fitting
  - Over 200 respondents from online survey
  - 10 individuals identified as having bought hearing aids online without face to face fitting
  - Over half needed reprogramming/adjustments from a local professional
  - None returned aids for credit

# What does the research tell us about internet hearing aids?

- Online hearing aid purchases may be dangerous
- May result in under/over amplification
- May result in poor fit
- May be cheaper, but will still need services of qualified individual
- Services should include real-ear verification, pre/post outcome measures, counseling on care/use of aids, insurance options, referrals for any other needs

# Recommendations



- While it may be very tempting to consider hearing aid purchases over the internet due to cost savings, hearing health may be compromised
- Online purchases can be successful if using an appropriate online source with the inclusion of face-to-face fitting
- Buyer Beware!



# Questions?

- For further information please contact:
  - Suzanne H. Kimball
  - Assistant Professor
  - Illinois State University
  - Campus Box 4720
  - Normal, IL 61790-4720
  - Office: 309-438-5707
  - Email: [skimball@ilstu.edu](mailto:skimball@ilstu.edu)