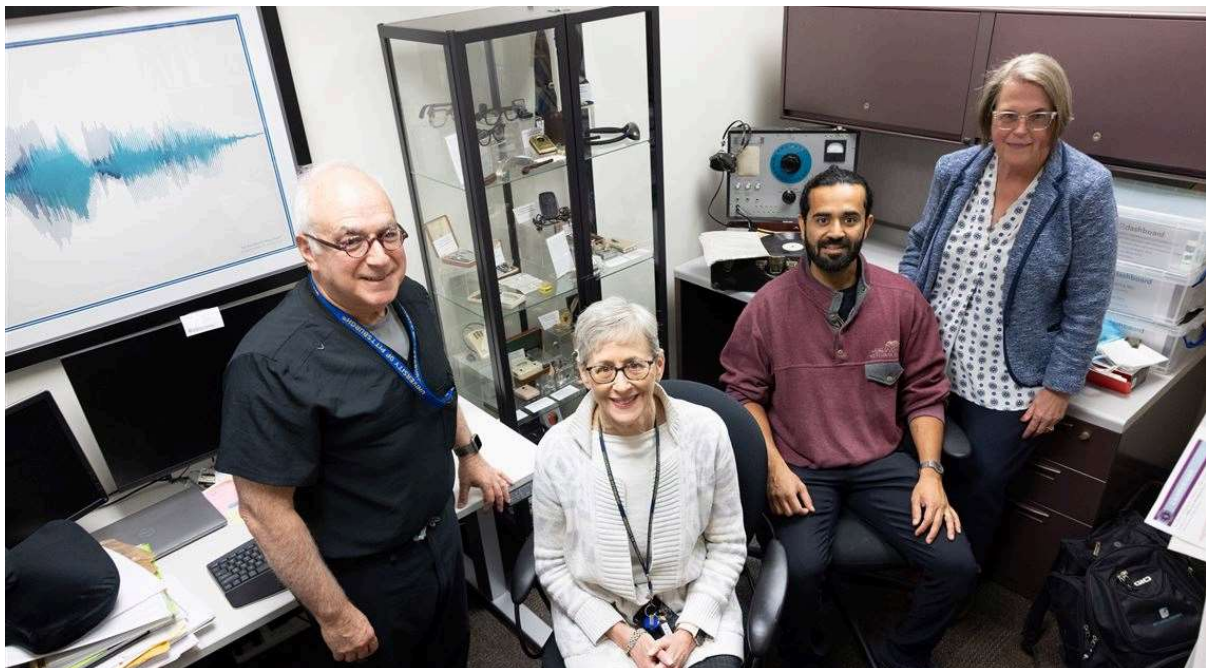




Pitt audiologists launch unique hearing aid dashboard

'Our goal was really to create another pathway and increase access to hearing care'



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When hearing aids became available over the counter in late 2022 following Food and Drug Administration approval, millions of Americans were given the opportunity for better hearing and improved quality of life.

The news, though, also came with a large dose of confusion.

Hundreds of products, with an array of features and costs, soon flooded the market. That created ample choice, but potential confusion for those searching for hearing aids for the first time.

So a team of University of Pittsburgh audiologists, hearing scientists and web developers created an online dashboard to help clear up confusion for

thousands of over-the-counter hearing aid users and those interested in purchasing them.

The [CLEARdashboard](#), or Consumer Led Evidence Amplification Resource, has been a few years in the making, said Catherine Palmer, cocreator and a longtime audiologist and professor at the Pitt School of Medicine.

“Our goal was really to create another pathway and increase access to hearing care,” said Palmer.

More than 1,000 visitors have looked at the dashboard since its launch on Oct. 1, said Jamie Katz, CLEAR’s co-creator and a research audiologist in the Pitt Department of Communication Science and Disorders.

As Palmer and her team were adamant about not using industry sponsorships to fund the project, the new dashboard fills a large gap in the market and helps address the overwhelm of choice burden.

“We actually think that’s really important, because others have ads or they promote certain products and not other products,” she said. “And we were really trying to say, ‘OK, there’s this sea of products, but how could we organize them in a way that would help people make these decisions for themselves?’”

Elora Gupta, regulatory and safety officer for Chicago-based Audition Technology, which started in Pittsburgh, said that the dashboard being free of sponsorships is “phenomenal.”

“People should know more about these resources that are not sponsored,” she said. “To have it unpaid is really awesome. I think there should be more like this. It would be a great service to the community.”

The site encourages a choose-your-own-adventure approach, where users answer questions based on their preferences and are directed to certain products based on their answers. The questions probe time of last hearing test, level of hearing loss, desired type of hearing aid and comfort with the technology that may come with the device, such as an app or Bluetooth.

Users can also browse a selection of around 200 hearing aids and access educational resources about the devices and hearing loss.

To develop the dashboard's content, Palmer and her team brought on a panel of 13 people with or providing care to those with hearing loss and industry experts. The panel met regularly to discuss their preferences and experiences using hearing aids.

As Katz started to look at the over-the-counter hearing aids available for purchase online, even he — an audiologist with decades of experience in industry and marketing — felt perplexed by the options.

“I was trying to determine the various features, with very little info on the manufacturer's website so we could categorize them,” he said. “That was a bit of a challenge, but nothing we couldn't overcome.”

That experience showed him why people with hearing loss may be reluctant to purchase something online with little information.

“We wanted to provide a resource anyone can go to, to learn more about hearing aids, to help that consumer be able to make an informed decision to meet their communication, lifestyle and financial needs,” he said.

The team is still working to improve the dashboard. In addition to the panel, Palmer has been running trials with participants who have hearing loss. She'll purchase over-the-counter hearing aids and ask participants to go through the steps of setting them up, which may involve connecting to a phone, putting in batteries or using a rechargeable device. The participants then rate the products based on these features, their efficiency and ease of use.

Palmer and Katz will use this information to create a score for each hearing aid listed on the dashboard. In time, users will be able to compare aids side-by-side based on that measure.

Palmer also hopes to continue to grow the lab trials of hearing aids on the market.

“It would be very cool to have labs all over,” she said.

Over-the-counter hearing aids are only approved for people with mild-to-moderate hearing loss. Those with moderate, severe or profound hearing loss, or people who want an audiogram or more personalized care, should see an audiologist, said Palmer.

But the journey doesn't stop when someone buys a hearing aid, said Gupta. They also have to wear it.

"The true benefit of a hearing aid is to use it daily and consistently," she said. "The burden of the brain is still happening. It's not just about someone going out and buying it. Are they using it every day, or is it sitting in a dresser drawer?"

That's why Gupta has worked to create a resource called the eCoach, free for those who buy hearing aids through Audition. The eCoach is a downloadable resource that helps new hearing aid users understand their device, its benefits and other hearing safety tips.

She hopes the future of over-the-counter hearing aid technology can continue in the spirit of innovation, with a consumer focus.

"There is this gap of knowledge about these devices in people who really need them," she said. "We're trying to make headway there as well."

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