

International Hearing Society Position Statement on the Sale of Hearing Aids Direct to Consumers through the Internet or Mail Order

The International Hearing Society (IHS) strongly opposes the sale of hearing aids directly to a consumer through the internet or mail order sales. It is the position of IHS that the public is best-served by adherence to Federal and State laws that require consumers receive a hearing evaluation and be fitted and dispensed a hearing aid only by a properly-licensed hearing aid specialist¹, audiologist, or otolaryngologist. Purchasing a hearing aid over the internet or through the mail without personal and continued involvement by a hearing health professional places consumers at risk of missed pathology, purchasing a hearing aid unnecessarily, purchasing a less than optimal device, further hearing damage due to an improperly programmed device, and little to no consumer protections or support/counseling services.

A hearing health professional conducts an in person, comprehensive hearing evaluation to determine the nature of one's hearing loss and affirm that hearing loss can be aided through the use of hearing aids, as well as screen for conditions that require referral to a physician as prescribed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).² Federal law also requires a prospective purchaser to receive a medical evaluation by a physician, preferably an otologist or otolaryngologist, during the six months preceding the purchase date "to assure that all medically treatable conditions that may affect hearing are identified and treated before the hearing aid is purchased."^{3,4} Hearing loss may be the symptom of a condition that cannot be detected through the use of an on-line, phone-based, or written hearing test such as acoustic neuroma, Meniere's disease, or obstruction of the external ear canal. Nor can an online, phone-based, or written hearing test appropriately capture the nature of the hearing loss, which may be sensorineural (cochlear &/or neural damage), or conductive (obstruction, perforation, or bone-related), or mixed. Therefore, hearing loss screening requires, by necessity, a visual examination of the ear by a properly-licensed professional and a comprehensive hearing evaluation.

Professionals engaged in hearing aid dispensing are uniquely trained and qualified to provide hearing evaluations; recommend, fit, and dispense hearing aids; and provide ongoing counseling. Advances in hearing testing and hearing aid technology allow hearing aids to be programmed to address an individual's unique hearing loss. Appropriately-programmed hearing aids, along with ongoing patient counseling, fitting, and adjustments, are essential to maximizing one's success with hearing aids and living with hearing loss.

In addition, the purchase of a hearing instrument through the internet or mail order may bypass the laws pertaining to the fitting of hearing instruments in the state where the patient lives, bypassing all of the consumer protection that those laws provide.

For these reasons, IHS strongly encourages those with hearing loss to see a licensed hearing aid specialist, audiologist, or otolaryngologist for evaluation of their hearing loss and to explore possible options that may help, which may (or may not) include the use of hearing aids or other assistive devices.

Approved by the Board of Governors on March 12, 2012.

¹ Dispenser

² 42 CFR § 801.421

³ 42 CFR § 801.421

⁴ Adults may sign a waiver to forgo the medical evaluation; children may not.