

## The Best Hearing Amplifiers

A hearing aid requires a doctor's consultation, a custom fitting and a few thousand dollars. But if you only notice mild hearing trouble when dining in restaurants or going to the movies, and you're looking for something you can buy over the counter, there are alternatives like hearing amplifiers. These devices—sometimes called personal sound amplification products (PSAPs)—are cheaper, more easily accessible and best for those with more minimal hearing impairment. We tested nine different hearing amplifiers and found four discreet devices that will help you hear for less than \$500.

## How We Chose the Best Hearing Amplifiers

We looked at all of the non-prescription devices we could find on manufacturers' sites like [HearingDirect.com](https://www.hearingdirect.com) plus those available at online retailers like Amazon and Walmart. From there, we rounded up a list of 38 products ranging in price from \$2 to \$600. Then we dove head-first into the research to find which features and components detracted from an effective hearing amplifier and which ones we couldn't hear without.

### Distinction between high and low frequencies

Many hearing amplifiers boost all sound, regardless of frequency. At best, this makes them ineffective hearing amplifiers, but this lack of distinction can also make them dangerous. A roundup of [research on the topic](#) states that low-cost devices are generally "of no value to individuals with mild-to-moderate hearing loss."

We dug into this, and sure enough, all of the sub-\$50 options we looked at failed to differentiate among frequencies. A hearing amplifier must be able to make the distinction—or better yet, have adjustable levels for personalized sound—to be effective. We cut products that couldn't meaningfully differentiate high and low frequencies.

### Portability

If you need an amplifier to help your hearing, you'll probably want it to be as comfortable and unobtrusive as possible. One of our experts agreed: Audiologist Michael Mallahan told us that one of the main reasons his patients hesitate to get hearing aids is out of a fear that "it will make them look old." We didn't want appearance to be the only thing coming between you and better hearing, so we cut a couple of products that claimed decent sound tech, but utilized clunky Walkman-style or around-the-neck designs. Instead, we focused on discreet designs.

### Tested in real-world scenarios

We tried our amplifiers one by one, wearing each for a few hours as we went about our lives. We brought them to concerts, wore them to work and yoga practice, took them on bike rides and used them during conversations with our Starbucks barista.

It's important to note that none of our in-office staff have hearing impairments, so most of our testing focused on the quality of the sound being amplified—did it sound clear and natural, or was it fuzzy and garbled? But we also brought in a hearing-impaired tester to validate our results and pick out any details we might have missed.

## THE 2 BEST HEARING AMPLIFIERS

**TWEAK FOCUS**—Superior sound quality; a traditional-looking device that produces surprisingly clear sound.

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### PROS

- Smooth sound quality
- Light and comfortable design
- Durable carrying case

### CONS

- Visible behind-the-ear device



### Why We Chose It

- Smooth sound quality—Beyond simple high-frequency amplification, the [Tweak Focus](#) produced a crisp, larger-than-life sound quality. During our concert outing, most of the devices we tested whistled sharply in our ears or were filled with heavy white noise. The Tweak Focus, on the other hand, was able to clearly separate the music from the background sounds.

We were also able to distinguish the vocals far better than with any other amplifier. Even in Starbucks, with all the echoing noise of a downtown Seattle coffee shop, we could comfortably carry on a conversation with the barista without being distracted by the background noise.

- Light and comfortable design—The lack of earbuds gave the Tweak such a light feeling we almost forgot we were wearing it. Other amplifiers incorporated an earbud design that had a habit of plugging our ears up, creating a fishbowl effect that made our voice sound like it was trapped far away. The Tweak's slim microphone features an earpiece tip that's just smaller than a peppercorn, allowing us to hear ourselves while being completely aware of the volume we were speaking at.
- Durable carrying case—All of the products we tested came with carrying cases, but the Tweak Focus' seemed best-suited for keeping the device safe. The outside casing withstood being run over by a bike, stomped on and sat on. The rounded edges allowed for easier handling and a better fit when placed in a purse or bag, but what really sold us on the case was the foam padding inside—none of our other cases had this. Given that you'll be spending a few hundred dollars on these devices, we liked that the Tweak's carrying case was exceptionally good at protecting the amplifier.
- Points to consider—The Tweak Focus is a visible behind-the-ear device. If you're not ready to wear a hearing amplifier that actually looks like one, the Tweak might not be the right pick for you. Despite being comfortable, the device still has that traditional behind-the-ear hearing aid design. It's still one of the best amplifiers on the market and if aesthetics aren't a deal breaker for you then it's definitely worth considering.

**SOUND WORLD SOLUTIONS CS50**—Sleek and subtle design; a discreet alternative to the traditional hearing aid look.

[Check Prices](#)

[Read Review](#)

#### PROS

- Unique design
- Mobile app
- Rechargeable batteries

#### CONS

- Difficult to adjust
- Picks up a lot of sound



### Why We Chose It

- Unique design—The biggest selling point of the [Sound World Solutions CS50+](#) is its appearance: it looks just like a normal Bluetooth headset that you would use to answer your phone. In fact, the CS50 connects to your handset, so you can use it to answer calls and stream music—just like a traditional Bluetooth headset—while still amplifying sound to better accommodate your hearing. We liked this design because it's a different route to discretion. Where the Tweak Focus is nearly invisible, the CS50 looks like any other Bluetooth earbud.
- Mobile app—We love the Sound World Solutions CS50's [mobile app](#). It pairs with both Apple and Android smartphones and lets you personalize your device via an automated hearing screening that can tune your device to your specific hearing needs. Or, if you're comfortable with a preset option, you can select one of three preset listening profiles. Additionally, you can use the app to equalize sound and configure for specific environments, like restaurants and theaters.
- Rechargeable batteries—We also liked the two rechargeable, magnetic batteries. We found the magnetic tech convenient for storage and portability, as it makes disassembly quick and simple: no hunting for runaway batteries. Stick the battery to your earpiece or charger and you're set. The mobile app walked us through every step of the battery replacement process, stripping any potentially uneasy feeling from handling a new hearing device.
- Points to consider:

- Difficult to adjust—The CS50 gets full points for having adjustable sound options, but it isn't the most user-friendly hearing amplifier. After an initial calibration, you can adjust overall volume, treble, bass and "mid" noise, but there was no explanation in the manual to help us decipher which setting we needed to change based on what we were hearing. In the end, we spent six hours tinkering with adjustments before things finally sounded the way we wanted them to.
- Picks up a lot of sound—The device might be *too* good at amplifying sounds—wearing the Sound World Solutions amplifier started feeling like wearing spyware. We were able to hear music coming from headphones and whispers from across the room. During the Starbucks noise test, we had to stop and adjust the sound settings before being able to really understand the barista clearly. If you want this hearing amplifier to sound right, you'll need to be willing to put substantial time into adjusting the options.

## Guide to Hearing Amplifiers

### How to find the right hearing amplifier for you

- Watch the Food and Drug Administration Reauthorization Act—In August 2017, Congress passed a law [allowing some hearing aids to be sold over the counter](#). Patients with severe hearing loss will still have to see a professional for consultation, but those with mild to moderate loss (the majority of the demographic) will soon be able to go into any pharmacy and conveniently purchase a hearing aid for possibly much cheaper than they're currently priced. The FDA has until 2020 to create regulations for over-the-counter hearing aids, so it's more of a slow transition than an overnight change. But if you'd prefer a hearing aid over an amplifier, research the law or check with a professional to see which hearing aids might now be less expensive and available at a pharmacy.
- Compare prices—It's true that hearing amplifiers are significantly cheaper than hearing aids, but good devices will still cost a couple hundred dollars. And while you don't need to spend a lot of money on a solid hearing amplifier, you don't want to spend too little. A [Consumer Reports study](#) found that devices under \$50 either offered no help at all, or over-amplified high-pitched noises like emergency sirens, which could cause further hearing loss.
- Consider the device's design—For some, a hearing amplifier's look is almost as important as its sound quality. There are many behind-the-ear options that don't look like traditional hearing aids. Some in-ear devices are even more difficult to spot. But it's also important to factor in comfort. Remember to read up on return policies since you won't know how the device will fit until it's in your ear.
- Look at additional features—Hearing amplifier technology has evolved over the last few years, with many offering the same kind of high-end features you'd expect from the newest smart devices. The [Sound World Solutions CS50+](#), for example, pairs with your smartphone and lets you control your device directly from an app. Other hearing amplifiers include similar features like wireless connectivity and automatic phone programming which essentially turns your amplifier into a Bluetooth device when you need to take a call. Think about which cutting-edge features you're most interested in and look for hearing amplifiers that meet those needs.

## Hearing Amplifier FAQs

### What's the difference between hearing aids and hearing amplifiers?

According to the FDA, [hearing aids](#) are "sound-amplifying device[s] intended to compensate for impaired hearing." Hearing amplifiers are "intended for non-hearing-impaired consumers to amplify sounds in the environment for a number of reasons, such as for recreational activities." If you notice you have difficulty hearing in certain situations, such as watching TV, but not in your daily life, then you might be a good candidate for a hearing amplifier.

### Is there an adjustment period for hearing aids?

Even though we hear through our ears, our brains actually process the sounds, so give your brain time to get used to all the unfamiliar noise. Nicholas Reed, an audiologist at Johns Hopkins University told us there is really no specific timeline for this adjustment: "A lot has to do with how much the person wears their hearing aid and their attitude going into it."

### Does Medicare pay for hearing aids?

No. Most insurance providers, including Medicare, don't cover hearing aids or the necessary appointments. This major lack of coverage is, in part, due to the steep prices of hearing aids and the doctor appointments they require. With comparable tech on the rise, hearing amplifiers have the potential to provide a cheaper option for those not willing or able to spend [\\$6,000 or more](#) on their hearing.

Will the Food and Drug Administration Reauthorization Act affect hearing aid prices? Possibly. This law will essentially merge hearing aids and hearing amplifiers into a more consolidated price range. The experts we spoke with are excited, saying the new law will likely lower the cost of hearing aids while also creating a set standard for the devices we currently know as hearing amplifiers. If this is the case, hearing aids and hearing amplifiers will be cost-effective, better regulated and a more accessible option for consumers.

**The best hearing amplifiers: Summed up**

	<u><b>Tweak Focus</b></u>	<u><b>Sound World Solutions CS50+</b></u>
The best for...	Superior Sound Quality	Sleek and Subtle Design
Price	Starting at \$299	Starting at \$349
Design style	Behind-the-ear	Behind-the-ear
Warranty	6 months	90 days
Battery life	7-10 days	15 hours
Battery type	312 batteries	Rechargeable batteries
Bluetooth	X	✓
Mobile app	X	✓