

GIZMODO

This Funky Looking Hearing Aid Is the Future



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I have hearing problems. It's been a fact of life for as long as I can remember. A couple years ago, a surgeon and a tiny piece of titanium corrected the worst of those problems, but I'm due for another procedure. So when I heard about EarGo, a futuristic new type of hearing aid, I had to wonder how they'd work for me.

My mom has hearing problems, too. Unlike mine—manifested from a childhood of debilitating ear infections and surgeries—her problems developed later in life. She's getting older. Her hearing's just not what

it used to be. After trying a set of EarGos myself, I sent the same pair to my mom.

We were sitting in a Cracker Barrel, off the interstate in East Tennessee, when I handed the hearing aids to her. As soon as she put them in for the first time, my mom remarked that the restaurant sounded awful loud. I reminded her about the volume adjustment, a clever design feature that involves tapping your ear with your hand. She got the hearing aids to a comfortable level, and our food arrived.

“Oh wow,” she said, putting her fork down. “I can hear myself chew. I haven’t heard myself chew in years. This is weird.”

“Isn’t it?” I replied.

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A few weeks before, I’d met with an EarGo executive at a hotel restaurant in midtown Manhattan. He explained the backstory of a Swiss doctor and fly fishing enthusiast who’d been inspired by flies to create a hearing aid with slim silicone feathers that would hold the device in place while also letting in ambient sound. When I slid one of the buds into my own ear, it made immediate sense. The sound of the room wasn’t blocked out, yet the design allowed the entire hearing aid to slide into my ear canal so that it was practically invisible. A transparent string, not unlike a fishing line, allowed me to take it out.



EarGo sent me a set of the standard hearing aids a few weeks later. The company also explained that the device could be fine-tuned to compensate for my specific deficiencies. My once debilitating hearing loss had been largely corrected, but it wasn't gone, so I got the standard pair.



I wore them for a few days, and they helped. The EarGo case doubles as a charger with a backup battery that's convenient if you're not charging them every night. The design of the whole kit feels less like a

medical device and more like something you'd buy in an Apple Store. Over time, I realized that wearing the EarGo hearing aid in my corrected ear produced some feedback, while my weaker right ear sounded great. Surgery felt like a better solution for issue. Besides I was content not to need another gadget.

But I wondered: could EarGo provide an affordable alternative to the notoriously expensive hearing aids you buy through you doctor? Getting hearing aids usually requires multiple fittings and at least one visit to a doctor. EarGo is in the process of streamlining that process by moving much of it online. Some states will still require a doctor's visit, but the EarGo hearing aids remain cheaper than almost all other certified medical devices for hearing, at \$1,980 for the standard set. A custom-tuned set costs \$500 more.



The hearing aids are virtually invisible.

EarGo's hearing aids also boast a better design, one that doesn't require people to strap some beige-colored horseshoe to their heads. My mom especially loved that she could wear hearing aids, and nobody would notice.

In her first couple of weeks wearing the EarGos, my mom marveled at how much she hadn't been hearing. The sound of her car tires rolling along the highway was something else she hadn't heard in years. Her friends immediately noticed that they didn't have to repeat themselves anymore. She didn't have to max out the TV volume. Anyone who can suddenly hear for the first time in years has similar stories. I know I do.

The presence of a new piece of technology in my mom's life didn't go unnoticed. She often forgot to charge the devices and—even more often—decided not to wear them for fear of getting them wet or for worrying that she'd kill the battery.



A few weeks after she started using the stock set of EarGos, one of them crapped out. She called the company and they offered to send her a new pair but also recommended the custom option. She'd have to get an audiogram and send the results to company. She did, and the company sent her a new pair that would compensate for her specific hearing loss. With the new pair, my mom told me, she didn't adjust the aids as often, and didn't struggle to hear like she used to.

I recently talked my mom about how she's liking her EarGo hearing aids six months in. She says they're nothing short of life-changing.

“Being hard of hearing is embarrassing,” my mom told me over the phone this week. “But the new hearing aids have enabled me to not have to constantly think about positioning myself so that I can hear someone without embarrassing myself.”

Of course, folks could say the same thing about any old hearing aids. What my mom especially likes about these are the battery life and the charging case. She says the EarGos last a day and charge without a recharge, and when they do die, a couple hours in the charging case lasts the rest of the day. For the most part, she also likes the feature that lets her turn them up or down by tapping her ear.

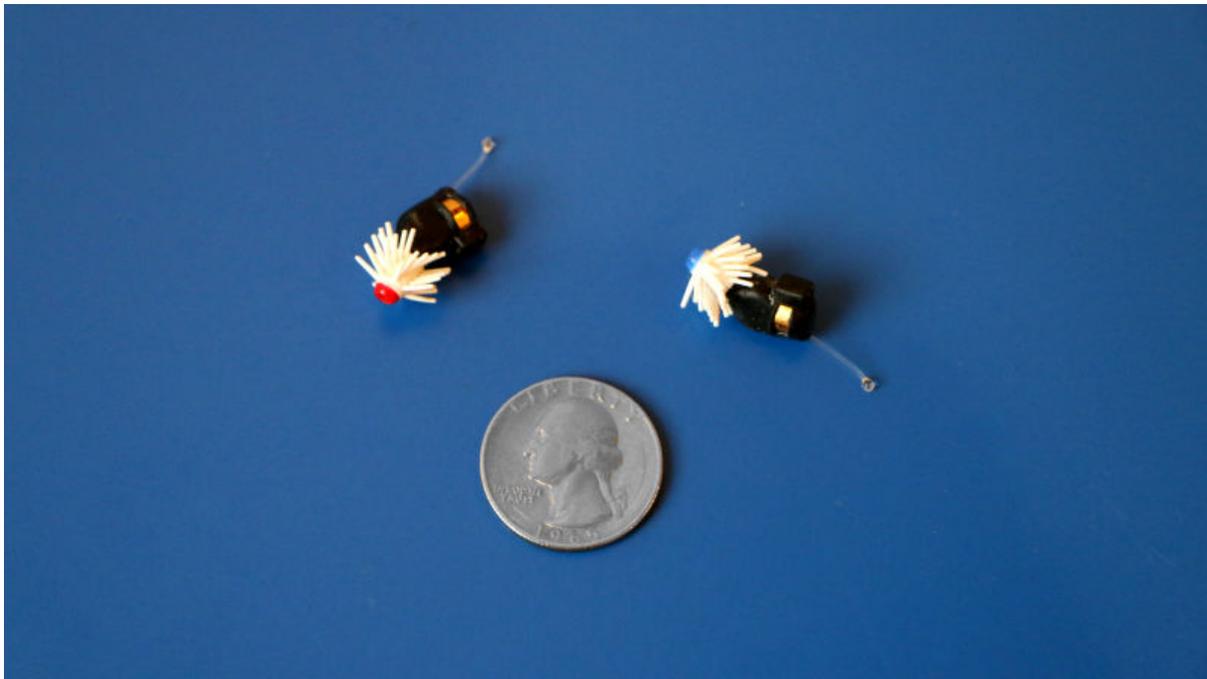
“The only thing that annoys me is that sometimes I'm in a situation that gets louder all of a sudden, like clapping in a performance, and it makes the EarGos ring,” my mom said. “I don't like that. By the time I tap my head to turn it down it's too late.”

Then again, she can hear herself chew—and hear her friends talk to her—for the first time in years.

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I don't want hearing aids. If and when I do, the EarGo kit is appealing. The set up is equal parts convenient and elegant, from a gadget geek's perspective, at least. The puck-shaped carrying case slash charger slash battery makes great sense. The fly fishing-inspired design of the hearing aids themselves works fantastically well. The price is more than relatively reasonable; it's sensible.

What's truly impressed me, however, is learning about my mom's experience. She lived without normal hearing for so long that she couldn't be bothered correcting it by the time she tried the EarGos. Now, the funny little buds are an integral part of her life. She can't be bother to wear them when she's at home relaxing so she leaves them out and retreats to her more peaceful, hearing-impaired state. Yet she won't meet up with friends without wearing them. In a sense, the way that my mom uses the EarGos represents the best definition of why anyone would want a hearing aid. The help is there when she needs it, and it's easy.



ReadMe

- Just as tiny and invisible as Beltone's top-of-the-line hearing aid
- Fits pretty much any ear comfortably and without the need for a special fitting
- Rechargeable so you don't blow thousands on expensive battery replacements
- Relatively cheap and easy compared to the traditional health insurance-fueled headache
- At nearly \$2000 still not cheap