

FCC Regulations for Hearing Aid Compatible Phones

In August 2003, the Federal Communications Commission established rules and standards for digital wireless phones to guarantee their compatibility with hearing aids as well as ensure the availability of acceptable models by setting benchmarks for manufacturers. These rules became part of the Hearing Aid Compatibility Act, which Congress passed for landlines in 1988. Hearing impaired cell phone users should understand the issues and become familiar with device technologies to choose the best cell phone. Consider factors that include both cell phone and hearing aid ratings, the connection standard of your service provider, assistive phone features and bridge accessories.

Know Your Hearing Aid

When purchasing a hearing aid, check with your audiologist for the best kind of device for your situation. With your doctor's approval, choose a hearing aid that goes either completely or partly in the ear canal. Both of these types are easier to use with cell phones than other models. However, they are best for those with a mild to moderate hearing loss. In addition, determine if your hearing aid has a telecoil feature. The t-coil is a small coil of wire that can pick up magnetic signals that represent sounds. When you set your hearing aid to the telecoil mode, it only picks up the electromagnetic signals, as opposed to the microphone mode, which picks up all sounds. Therefore, you can hear best on a cell phone if you use the telecoil setting, as there is no feedback, and unwanted background noises are not amplified. Only in-the-ear and behind-the-ear hearing aids, which work best for those with severe hearing loss, have telecoils.

Understand Cell Phone and Hearing Aid Ratings

The FCC sets standards for both hearing aids and cell phones to help you choose the right cell phone. Both devices are rated for telecoil and microphone levels on a scale of one to four, labeled T1 to T4 and M1 to M4. The higher the number the more likely you will not have interference and will have a clearer connection. When you buy a phone, look for the highest possible combined rating. The highest possible rating is M4/T4.

Shop for Your Phone

When you shop for a phone, look for the M and T ratings on a card next to the phone, on the cell phone package or in the user manual. Ask a salesperson to help you if you don't see the ratings. Manufacturers are also required to post HAC information about their phones on their websites. The same phone may have a different rating depending on your carrier; usually this is due to the channel access method they use – usually Code Division Multiple Access or Global System for Mobile. Generally CDMA systems work better with hearing aids. After you determine the phones with the best ratings, try several to determine which phone works best with your hearing aid. Be sure that you can return the phone in a stated time period and then use your cell phone in various places and circumstances, listening for interference in different situations.

Additional Helpful Features and Accessories

Look for a cell phone with built-in features such as ringtones in different pitches and volumes, vibrating modes, flashing screens or speech-to-text. All of these may help if you have trouble hearing on your phone. Accessories such as neckloops or earhooks made for hearing aids with a telecoil make it easier to hear. Bluetooth devices that connect directly to a behind-the-ear hearing aid or with a neckloop or earhook are also available.

References

- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association: Hearing Aids and Cell Phones
- Center for Hearing Loss Help: Finding Hearing Aid Compatible Cell Phones
- Mayo Clinic: Hearing Loss
- Hearing Loss Association of North Carolina: Telecoil
- Federal Communication Commission: Hearing Aid Compatibility for Wireless Telephones
- Access Wireless: People Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Resources

- AT&T: Hearing Aid Compatibility
- Verizon Wireless: Hearing Aid Compatible Products
- Apple: iPhone: Hearing Aid Compatibility (HAC)
- LG: Hearing Aid Compatibility
- Motorola: Hearing Aid Compatibility
- Samsung: Samsung's Wireless Products and Accessibility