

The Apple effect: could Apple’s involvement redefine the future of hearing aid technology?

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As Apple enters hearing health, this article explores how its tech may reduce stigma and reshape hearing care, without replacing clinical expertise.

As hearing health professionals, we are all acutely aware of the gap between prevalence of hearing loss and adoption rates of hearing technology. Care is needed with headline adoption figures. While roughly 9–10% of the general adult population may use hearing aids in some surveys, the more relevant clinical metric – adoption among people who report hearing difficulty – is substantially higher: ≈50.5% in the UK (EuroTrak UK 2025) [1]. Stigma remains a barrier (RNID 2024 found that many people feel hearing aids have not achieved the social acceptance of glasses) [2]. Apple’s AirPods Pro now include regulated hearing-health features (Hearing Test, Hearing Aid and Hearing Protection modes) and have received regulatory authorisation for OTC hearing-aid software; their potential to lower the barrier to entry is significant, but AirPods are not a substitute for a calibrated audiological assessment and personalised fitting for more complex losses. Might Apple’s integration of regulated hearing features into a widely used lifestyle product help shift public perception of hearing support?

Apple has long since been known for its inclusive technology. With longstanding features such as VoiceOver (a screen reader for users with visual impairments) and Sound Recognition (alerts users to sounds like doorbells and alarms), Apple is known for its accessibility. One of their core principles is ‘Innovation that is accessible by design’ and this rang true back in 2016 with the introduction of Made for iPhone (MFi) hearing devices. This allowed users



to connect their Apple devices directly to their hearing devices for the first time. This development marked a change in the field. Rather than users needing to seek out specialist devices that can feel medical or isolating, Apple sought to integrate these functions into technology that is already desirable and widely used.

So, do traditional hearing aid manufacturers need to be worried? Apple has made its intentions clear by releasing hearing health features into its already successful AirPods Pros. These features include Conversation Boost, Live Listen, and even “clinical-grade hearing aid” software that adjusts amplification to an audiogram. To put this in perspective, Apple reportedly sold over 66 million AirPods worldwide last year and spent approximately \$31.4 billion on research and development. Comparatively, 22.69 million hearing aids were sold worldwide in 2024 and the market was valued at \$14.35 billion. Where others,

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such as Bose, have attempted to enter the hearing health space and seemingly failed, Apple is doing so with unlimited resources and strong brand loyalty.

Apple’s strength lies not only in its innovation, but also its cultural influence. AirPods are a lifestyle product that is deemed almost a necessity in today’s world. They are visible, sleek and relatively affordable. Hence, they are desired by those of all walks of life and ages. When the device millions use for calls and music also provides hearing support, it transitions from a ‘headphone’ to a wellness tool. This is where hearing aid manufacturers have struggled. Despite advances in technology and even design, hearing devices are still associated with ageing and disability. Apple has somehow managed to avoid that barrier due to their prestige and consumer trust. For this reason, a 30-year-old with mild hearing loss may feel more comfortable trialling hearing technology through AirPods they already own rather than visiting their local audiologist, particularly when those AirPods are already offering the full package, hearing test included.

This disruption is unique in that Apple isn’t marketing these features as medical devices. Instead, they are subtly shifting public perception: reframing hearing support

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as mainstream wellness, not disability. The long-repeated statistic that ‘it often takes those with hearing loss seven years so seek support’ may now change. Apple has the opportunity to lower the barrier to entry for hearing support. However, it’s important to recognise its limits. AirPods are not a substitute for calibrated hearing assessments, real-ear measurements or the kind of tailored support needed for more complex or progressive hearing loss. In that sense, audiologists remain critical in guiding patients beyond entry-level support. Beyond diagnostics and device fitting, audiologists play a crucial role in patient counselling, long-term support and personalising care for individual lifestyles. As hearing care becomes increasingly blended with consumer technology, our expertise will be key to navigating the grey areas – ensuring that convenience doesn’t compromise clinical outcomes or quality of life. The opportunity for audiologists and manufacturers alike is to ensure patients don’t stop at AirPods, but are supported to take the next step when needed.

Apple’s entry into hearing wellness is not just a product launch – it’s a cultural moment. By normalising hearing support through desirable consumer technology, they may finally begin to overcome the stigma that has held many people back from

seeking help. But technology alone isn’t the solution. The role of audiologists has never been more important: to guide, support and ensure that those taking their first step with AirPods don’t stop there. The future of hearing care is likely to be hybrid – blending digital innovation with clinical expertise – and our profession must be ready to evolve with it.

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