Self-fitting hearing aids (SFHAs) are gaining ground in the online marketplace, where they are often marketed as a low-cost alternative to traditional hearing health care (HHC). A recent evaluation of a commercially available SFHA, however, demonstrated that even when assistance with the task was available from a family member, 45% of the study participants were unable to successfully complete the self-fitting procedure. As part of an ongoing field trial investigating the setup, management, and fitting outcomes of SFHAs among adults with bilateral mild-to-moderate hearing loss, we are aiming to test the hypothesis that knowledgeable support could mean the difference between success and failure with a SFHA. The existing HHC system has the clinical capacity to deliver such support, which would allow SFHAs to become a viable, low-cost rehabilitation option. As an added advantage, support could be provided by a trained paraprofessional, enabling the audiologist's time to be more efficiently allocated to clients with more complex needs.

Who is qualified to provide support?

The relative scarcity of audiologists, particularly in remote areas and the developing world, is a driving force behind the development of SFHAs. To determine whether a trained non-audiologist is able to provide effective support, two adults with no clinical background were trained to act as clinical assistants (CAs). The CAs learned how to set up and program a SFHA, respond to questions from study participants while they are performing the setup procedure in the laboratory, assist participants who are unaware they have made an error, and provide clinical support from a distance during the 12-week field trial.

Who is likely to need support?

Self-management encompasses the skills, decisions, and behaviours that are applied by an individual in the course of managing a chronic health condition. Self-management is a key factor in predicting the extent to which an individual requires professional support to successfully manage a health intervention. In the context of SFHAs, our hypothesis is that individuals with lower levels of self-management skill will be more likely to need support with using their devices in day-to-day life.

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Is the future of hearing aids in a flatpack? Issues of clinical support for self-fitting hearing aids

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