

Raves (Yes, It's True) for a New Hearing Aid

By TARA PARKER-POPE

Few products are hated as much as hearing aids.

The devices can squeal with feedback and overamplify background noises like the click of a turn signal or whirl of a ceiling fan. They must be removed for showering or sleeping, and their batteries die frequently. Many users, out of exasperation, decide they'd rather live with hearing loss.

But now scientists have come up with a different kind of hearing aid. While the device, called the Lyric, is being used in only 500 patients, it appears to have overcome many of the problems associated with traditional hearing aids — without the expense and uncertainty of surgery and anesthesia.

The Lyric, made by InSound Medical of Newark, Calif., is hidden deep inside the ear canal, just four millimeters (about one-sixth of an inch) from the ear drum. While doctors for years have been implanting hearing devices in the middle ear, the Lyric is not an implant: it can be removed with a small magnet. It is worn 24 hours a day, and its batteries last one to four months.

Typically, anything that clogs the ear canal would trap moisture and pose an infection risk, but the Lyric is surrounded by a spongy material that allows moisture to escape. Because it sits so close to the ear drum, doctors say that it works more efficiently and that sounds are more natural because they don't have to be amplified as much.

When the Lyric's battery dies, the entire device is replaced. Patients do not pay for a new device every time; instead, they pay an annual subscription fee of \$2,900 to \$3,600 for both ears (less if the hearing loss is in only one ear). Insurance plans typically do not cover the cost of the Lyric, or any other hearing device.

A magnet is used to control the volume, turn it on and off and remove it when the battery runs out. It takes only

a few minutes for a doctor to insert a replacement device.

The Lyric does not work for everyone. In particular, some ear canals are too narrow to accommodate it, and the company estimates that it is not suitable for up to half of potential patients. A planned newer version should work for about 85 percent of patients, it says.

A device set deep in the ear canal and removed with a magnet.

Still, it is already getting an enthusiastic reception from patients and from hearing specialists not connected with the company. "There are a certain number of patients who just can't get over having something in their ear, just as there are a certain number of patients who can't wear contact lenses," said Dr. Chester F. Griffiths, chairman of the department of surgery at the Santa Monica U.C.L.A. Medical Center. "But that's the minority. The patients that have them love them."

Dr. Griffiths says he has no financial ties to the Lyric, nor does he receive a commission for referring patients.

One patient who swears by the device is Mike Waufle, the 53-year-old defensive line coach for the New York Giants. After a stint in the Marines and regular exposure to the sounds of gunfire, Mr. Waufle suffered hearing loss that grew worse and worse as he aged.

On the football field, he just turned up the volume on his headset. But the locker room was a different story. Some voices were impossible to hear (including that of his last boss, Jon Gruden, the former Oakland Raiders head coach). Players learned they needed to face him when they spoke to him. Using a

traditional hearing aid, he found it difficult to control his own voice.

"I teach a lot in a classroom as a coach, but when I would wear a hearing aid my voice pattern wasn't very good," he said. "It was all over the place. I just took it out most of the time. I missed an awful lot."

As it happened, a team doctor was one of a handful of physicians test-marketing the Lyric, which has been available for about 16 months. Mr. Waufle tried it, and he says it has changed his life.

"My voice pattern is so natural, and I hear so much better," he said. "Obviously, it's easier to carry on normal conversations without having to always say, 'Huh? What did you say?' And it helps just enjoying life over all and being able to hear the simple things like birds and other sounds you take for granted."

Mr. Waufle says he has no financial ties to the company and receives no benefit for talking about his experience with the device. (The company says none of the people featured in testimonials on its Web site, www.lyrichearing.com, receive any form of compensation for their endorsements.)

Right now, the Lyric is offered only through a dozen clinics in California, Florida and New Jersey, but it should be available at about 100 sites by the end of the year. Some patients who don't live near a clinic simply fly or drive to a site four or five times a year. InSound is a privately held firm, although the pharmaceutical giant Johnson & Johnson is a major investor.

Dr. Robert A. Schindler, a co-founder of InSound and chairman emeritus of the department of otolaryngology at the University of California, San Francisco, says he has had hearing loss most of his life and has worn a Lyric since 2005. He says he remembers listening to an orchestra and hearing the light ping of the triangle.

"I realized I hadn't heard it before," he said. "That was a very exciting moment for me."