

A new feature turns Apple AirPods into impromptu hearing aids. We tried it

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You almost certainly bought Apple's wireless Bluetooth \$159 AirPods to listen to music or podcasts, and not because you planned to use them as a sort of hearing aid substitute.

But hearing more clearly in a [noisy environment](#) is just what AirPods

promise to help you do through the iOS 12 operating system that launches in the fall, and that—with all the associated risks—is now available as a public beta.

Through iOS 12, AirPods can exploit a "Live Listen" Apple-developed assistive hearing technology that has been available since 2014 on an iPhone, iPad or iPod touch with compatible, third-party Made For iPhone hearing aids or cochlear implants.

To use the feature with your AirPods, pair them per usual through Bluetooth on your iOS 12 device. Then, in Settings go to Control Center, tap Customize Controls and then Hearing. After placing the AirPods in your ears, bring up Control Center on your phone, tap Hearing—it's the onscreen button with an ear—and then tap Live Listen.

By using the iPhone's microphone as a directional mic, you'll hear the amplified sound through the AirPods. You may want to place the phone next to the person you want to hear for optimal results, lest you hear unwanted sounds, as I did trying the feature out in a crowded and noisy diner.

You can also imagine a student placing a phone next to a professor in a lecture hall, provided the handset and AirPods remain in Bluetooth range.

This video clip shows how Live Listen works with hearing aids.

During my tests in the rather loud diner, I could indeed better hear the people across the table, though I couldn't compare the audio quality on AirPods to traditional hearing aids. But Apple is quick to point out that AirPods are by no means trying to supplant or become substitutes for these devices, and the company advises you to consult a doctor or audiologist if you are having difficulty hearing.

AirPods have been a surprising success for Apple, with CEO Tim Cook recently calling them a "runaway hit."

And if a Bloomberg report this week is to be believed, Apple is working on new water resistant AirPods with noise cancellation, likely to hit next year and likely to exceed their current price.

I recently asked Bose chairman Bob Maresca about the competitive threat to his company that comes from AirPods: "They did a nice job" on AirPods and sell them "at a very competitive price," Maresca said. "But for those people that buy Bose for the reason that they buy Bose, it hasn't hurt our business."

Maresca in fact says that AirPods have "kind of raised the boat for everybody, because now it's very acceptable to walk around with something in your ears."

Now apparently there's another purpose for Apple's AirPods, as devices in your ears to help you pick up what other people are saying more clearly.

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