

Music and Hearing Loss

There has been concern in recent years about recreational noise exposure causing hearing loss, particularly in adolescents and young adults. Sources of recreational noise exposure can include our noisy toys such as quads and snowmobiles, our use of firearms for hunting or target shooting and of course, our love of listening to music, often at loud levels.

Music surrounds many of us on a daily basis, sometimes just when we are in an elevator or store and others in the comfort of our own homes or when we go out to socialize. Besides the pure entertainment value, music has been shown to have many positive health benefits. Music is indeed an important part of our lives.

There is no doubt that music is in our world to stay. What has changed with music is the way we listen to it. We still listen to our sound systems in our cars, and sometimes our stereos or CD players at home, but now with the incredible advances in technology many people listen to music via MP3 players, iPods, iPhones or similar devices. These personal listening devices (PLDs) can store thousands of entries in a single device and provide hours and hours of uninterrupted music favorites. Listening to these devices is through earphones and it appears that ear bud type earphones are the preferred choice. Many of the popular PLDs are able to produce extremely loud outputs and therefore risk causing hearing loss if used at louder settings. Also, studies have shown that using PLDs around noisy areas significantly increases the risk of hearing loss due to the desire to turn up the level of the music to be heard above the level of the noise. PLDs are enjoyed and used in many settings and there is no reason why we cannot continue to enjoy them, however we have to be aware of the potential to harm our hearing and ensure that we are listening to our personal listening devices at safe levels. Remember to keep the volume low. If you turn it up for a song you really like, turn it back down after. If you are going to be using PLDs in noisy areas, use earphones that minimize the impact of outside noise (such as sound isolation and noise cancellation earphones) so that there is no need to increase the volume. Also, listening to PLDs outside at louder levels may make you less aware of your surroundings and create a safety risk, so caution should be exercised.

Another popular sound source for music is when we socialize, either at clubs, weddings, house parties etc. Sound levels in these environments often tend to be elevated. Depending on the amount of exposure and the level of the sound, hearing loss can occur over time. Unfortunately people don't always heed the warning signs of hearing loss such as ringing in the ears. We also have increasing opportunity of listening to music by hearing bands, musicians, and singers at concerts. These entertainers provide a wonderful musical experience drawing the audience into their world of incredible sound. Often the music presented at concerts can be very loud especially for those closer to the speakers. Many people have experienced ringing in the ears which is a sign that the music is too loud and is potentially damaging to the hearing system. The musicians/performers also are exposed to loud levels when they perform at concerts but also in the many hours of practice. Many entertainers are realizing the potential impact that all of this may have on their hearing and are taking steps such as getting musician's earplugs to wear when they practice and perform.

Being aware that loud levels of music in whatever form or through whatever medium can potentially impact hearing does not mean we cannot enjoy our music as we have done for thousands of years, it just means we take appropriate steps to ensure we will continue to hear and enjoy the listening pleasure that music provides. If you have control over the level of sound, just remember to keep it down for the majority of your listening time. If you can't control it, then wear earplugs; there are many choices out there to choose from. Enjoy music, and do it safely so that you can enjoy it for a lifetime.

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