

Wellness

EMPLOYEE

report



Listen up and turn it down

Take a stand against hearing loss

You don't have to look for them. All you have to do is close your eyes and listen. Sounds are everywhere. Lots of them. And all too often people don't take proper precautions to protect their hearing. Or worse, they try to drown out the unwanted noise by cranking up the volume on the sounds they enjoy. But by doing so, we're all in danger of exposing ourselves to an unhealthy level of noise.

Noise-Induced Hearing Loss (NIHL) is becoming more common. Up to half of all cases of this kind of hearing loss result from an overexposure to excessive noise in which the inner ear and the auditory nerve have been harmed.

NIHL is a permanent condition, yet in most cases it's entirely preventable. Baby Boomers are now at the front of the line of the people facing hearing loss, an astonishing 20 years earlier than previous generations did.

A potentially damaging exposure to noise (such as the constant sound of heavy machinery) isn't restricted to everyday occurrences in a work or social setting. An isolated incident (for instance, the sound of a gunshot or the sound of a big explosion) can be equally devastating to our inner ear.

Occupational health

Noise-induced hearing damage is one of the most recognized work-related illnesses or injuries. Current statistics

reveal that 44 per cent of carpenters and 48 per cent of plumbers have reported a hearing loss. Think of airport employees enduring the continuous roar of airplane engines. Or landscape workers and the ear-numbing buzzing of lawnmowers or chainsaws removing branches and debris. Working environments such as agriculture, mining, construction, manufacturing, transportation, and the military are prime settings for excessive amounts and levels of noise. And while workers may acknowledge that risk is just "part of the job", there are certain steps that can be put in place to help minimize a health hazard to the employee.

Noise in the workplace – simple steps can have a significant impact

Take care of your hearing. The ill effects of noise are non-reversible. Ensure that:

- machines are maintained regularly, so they are less noisy;
- sound-absorbing materials are used where possible;
- noisy machines are enclosed;
- noise is directed away from employees; and
- employees wear appropriate hearing protection equipment at all times.

Source: Charney, Cy. *The Portable Mentor*. (Toronto: Stoddart: 2000) p.4

Hearing on the home front

Many of our favorite leisure time activities expose us to noise. Some of these activities put us potentially at risk for a gradual, noise-induced hearing loss. Think about how loud a drill or electric saw sounds when you're putting those trusty power tools to good use. Listen to the endless dinging every time someone plays with their electronic toys and games. Or think of the number of options we now have in the ever-expanding line of personal stereo systems and home theatre set ups.

Minimizing your risks

- Limit the amount of time you spend on leisure activities that are excessively noisy.
- Keep your car and home audio systems at enjoyable but reasonable and safe levels.
- Wear tightly-fitted hearing protection such as earplugs or earmuffs if the environment merits it.
- Avoid buying children's toys that produce excessively high sound levels. Keep in mind that children may hold toys closer to their ears than adults.

If you have concerns with your hearing, it's important that you contact your family physician or an audiologist.

How much is too much?

Your ears can be damaged by sounds at or above 85 decibels. A decibel is a unit that measures the intensity of sound. The scale that measures sounds that can be heard by humans ranges between zero and 140. A normal conversation is about 60 decibels, while equipment such as chainsaws, hammer drills, and bulldozers ring in at over 100 decibels.

There is no known risk of hearing loss posed by sounds with levels below 70 decibels, no matter how long they last. If listening to music at 70 decibels, the sound level is about the same as what you experience while driving a four-door family car on the highway with the windows closed.

Regarding sound levels that are higher than 70 decibels, the duration of daily exposure (that is, the amount of time you listen every day) becomes an important risk factor. Sounds with levels of 85 decibels pose no known risk of hearing loss if you are exposed for no longer than 45 minutes per day. However, a significant risk of permanent hearing loss is posed by sound levels of 85 decibels or higher, if you are exposed for eight hours per day.

This threshold, exposure to 85 decibels for eight hours daily, has been adopted by several Canadian provinces as the limit for occupational noise.

Source: Health Canada, (It's Your Health) "*Personal Stereo Systems and the Risk of Hearing Loss.*"

You can't see it. You can't touch it. And if you're not careful, you someday may not be able to hear it. No matter where you encounter it, give some thought to protecting yourself against excessive amounts of noise and the potential damage it can cause to your hearing. Put safety first, turn it down, and listen with care.

Source: Health Canada (<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/enviro/leisure-loisirs-eng.php#is> and <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/life-vie/stereo-baladeur-eng.php>), <http://www.soundsense.ca/>



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