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Eh? What Did You Say?

One-third of Americans have hearing loss due to noise

By Kat Avila | Web Published 5.15.2007

I pulled out my earplugs as the movie's closing credits rolled. I was still surprised at how loud the sound was. Looking at the mostly elderly patrons walking out (it was a weekday matinee), I thought the high decibels was due to them being hard of hearing. Yet, I also have to wear earplugs when I go to the movies with my friends on weekends.

I carry earplugs in my daypack wherever I go. I have not always used them, partly out of not wanting to appear uncool. But I learned my lesson last year when I went to an event where several bands were playing. Aside from the temporary hearing loss, my ears hurt for a week.

One-third of Americans have hearing loss due to noise. Noise-induced hearing loss (NIHL) is preventable in most instances. Workers in certain occupations and people who regularly use devices such as iPods and who attend loud concerts need to be aware.

NIHL can be gradual, with damage to higher frequencies first. A coworker of mine sometimes has problems hearing the higher pitched voices of women, though she can understand me fairly well because my pitch is low (I used to sing alto in chorus).

Consonants such as "s", "f", and "sh" - at the high end of the speech range of 300-4000 Hz - start to drop out. Look at this sentence: "Look at thi enten." The problem lies not solely in word recognition, but the information "s" can carry, such as indicating plurals and possession.

Perhaps the most shocking thing I read was at the H.E.A.R. site (www.hearnet.com): "Recent studies have shown an increased incidence of hearing loss among GRADE SCHOOL STUDENTS [emphasis mine] and musicians." Children are vulnerable because of their unawareness of NIHL or how to protect themselves.

A hair dryer can produce 85 decibels of sound. If you listened above that level for eight hours or more, you would incur NIHL. Music events, such as a rock concert, have been measured at 100 to 120 decibels.

Some people are slow to use hearing protection because they are afraid they will not hear their friends talking or hear music clearly. With foam plugs, I can still hear conversation. In a pinch, I have used pieces of tissue or napkin, which is not very effective, but makes my ears feel a little better. At the H.E.A.R. site, they advertise plugs that prevent noise damage but still allow you to hear a full range of sound.

A good article I found on earplugs was "Choose the Hearing Protection That's Right for You" by Carol Merry Stephenson, Ph.D. She writes, "... [T]he best hearing protector is the one that is comfortable and convenient and that you will wear every time you are in an environment with hazardous noise." It is easy to buy a fancy pair of plugs and not use them out of inconvenience.

As you walk around today, notice how much information comes to you through your sense of hearing. When you are picking up earplugs for yourself, throw some pairs into the basket for the kids.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

1. National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders. <http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/hearing/noise.asp> (information available in English and Spanish)



Web latinola.com



2. H.E.A.R.: A non-profit hearing information source for musicians and music lovers. <http://www.hearnet.com/index.shtmlrnrn3>. "Choose the Hearing Protection That's Right for You" by Carol Merry Stephenson, Ph.D. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/noise/about/chooseprotection.html>

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