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Understanding and Preventing Noise-induced Hearing Loss

(COLUMBUS, Ohio)— The most common type of permanent hearing loss is from frequent exposure to loud or moderately loud noise over a long period of time that causes damage to the soft tissue of the inner ear. Fortunately, this kind of hearing loss is preventable.

“Loud noise damages the inner ear’s ‘hair cells,’ tiny structures that vibrate and stimulate the major auditory nerve from the ear to the brain, normally signaling a sound that is interpreted by the brain at a specific pitch and level of loudness. Hearing may be damaged by either brief, intense sounds or exposure to loud noise over an extended period of time. Noise-induced hearing loss impacts higher frequencies first and will gradually progress into the lower frequencies, leading to problems understanding speech,” stated Tom Houston, M.D., a family physician in Columbus, Ohio.

Whether noise harms your hearing depends on the loudness, the pitch and the length of time you are exposed to the noise. The louder the sound, the shorter the exposure can be before damage occurs. For example, exposure to loud noise on a daily basis can begin to damage a person’s ears over time. Using power tools, listening to loud stereo headsets, attending a rock concert or hearing a gunshot may damage the hearing of some people after only a few times.

Houston stated, “Early hearing loss might be present if you notice ringing in your ears for several hours after sound exposure; your ears sometimes feel full or stopped up; voices sound muffled after you have been around music or loud noise for an extended time; and if you have difficulty hearing in noisy or group settings.”

A noise is too loud if you have to shout to be heard, you cannot understand the person speaking to you from less than two feet away and if the person standing near you can hear sounds from your stereo headset while it is on your head. People who use a headset and play music to mask the noise from a lawn mower, for example, are exposing themselves to extremely loud noise. Depending on the duration of the exposure, recovery can occur over time. If the ear is re-exposed to excessive sound too often, a permanent change in hearing may occur.

Prevent noise-induced hearing loss by reducing your exposure to noise by choosing quiet leisure activities, wearing earplugs or earmuffs when participating in noisy activities like attending concerts, when using power tools and lawn mowers, when riding motorcycles, and by placing rubber mats under noisy kitchen appliances to reduce noise at home.

“Children should receive a hearing screening at least once during middle school and then again during high school. The frequency for hearing screening among adults is not as clearly defined; however, if you are exposed to loud noise at work or have frequent exposure from leisure activities, talk to your family physician about getting a hearing test—a yearly hearing exam may be appropriate for those who are frequently in noisy environments,” said Houston.

The Ohio Academy of Family Physicians is a statewide professional association with more than 4,400 members, including practicing physicians, family medicine residents and medical students. The scope of family medicine encompasses all ages, both sexes and every disease entity. Family physicians provide comprehensive, continuing care to all members of the family.



FACT SHEET

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Noise-induced Hearing Loss

Signs of Noise-induced Hearing Loss

- Ringing in your ears for several hours after sound exposure
- Ears feel full or stopped up
- Speech that seems muffled or far away
- Difficulty hearing in noisy or group settings

How to Know if a Sound is too Loud

- If you have to shout to be heard above the noise
- If you cannot understand the person who is speaking to you from less than two feet away
- If a person standing near you can hear sounds from your stereo or ipod headset while it is on your head

Ways to Prevent Noise-induced Hearing Loss

- Reduce your exposure to noise by choosing quiet leisure activities
- Wear earplugs or earmuffs when participating in noisy activities like attending concerts, when using power tools and lawn mowers, and when riding motorcycles
- Place rubber mats under noisy kitchen appliances

Source: www.familydoctor.org