



Noise – it's murder on your ears

WHAT IS NOISE AND HOW CAN IT AFFECT YOUR HEARING?

NOISE IS DEFINED AS UNWANTED SOUND. BUT WHAT IS UNWANTED BY SOME MAY BE WANTED BY OTHERS. THE EAR DOES NOT DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN NOISE AND SOUND. THAT IS DONE BY THE BRAIN.

A small or moderate amount of noise can be enjoyable or stimulating, while exposure to an excessive amount of noise can cause damage to health and well being.

Noise can affect us in two ways:

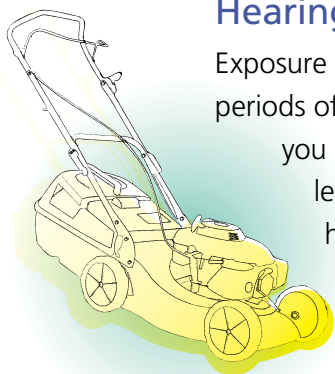
1. Annoyance: when you are simply annoyed or irritated by the noise.
2. Physical damage: when the noise actually damages the delicate hearing mechanism within the inner ear.

You may not find a noise annoying but it may be sufficiently loud to damage your hearing.

Hearing damage

Exposure to loud noise for long periods of time, such as when you are at work, can lead to a permanent hearing loss.

Excessively loud noise is when you must use a raised voice or shout to carry out a conversation at arm's length.



The first sign of hearing loss due to noise exposure is difficulty hearing in noisy situations such as at the dinner table, in a crowd, or in any situation where there is competing background noise.

Tinnitus

Sometimes a hearing loss may be accompanied by tinnitus (ringing in the ears or head noises) when there is no external noise present. Tinnitus may come and go, may be aggravated by other loud continuous or impulsive noise, may be triggered by exposure to loud noise, or may be an indication that you have ear damage. It can be a very distressing condition.

Can a hearing aid make up for hearing loss?

Hearing aids have come a long way in the last ten years. They are smaller, more sophisticated, and can be adjusted to suit individual hearing losses better than in the past.



Most people can get great benefit from a well-fitted hearing aid and listening can become a pleasure again.

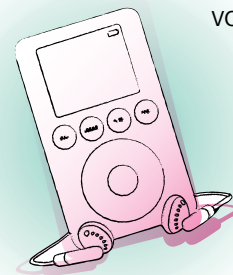
How much noise is too much noise?

If you need to raise your voice or shout in order to be understood in background noise, then the noise is too loud. Either do something to limit the noise, such as turn it off or turn it down, or move away from the noise.

If your ears "ring" after you have been in loud noise, or the world sounds a little quieter, then the noise level was hazardous to your hearing.

Leisure and music

Don't imagine for a moment that it is only workplace noise that has an effect on your hearing. The ear cannot distinguish between noise produced by work activities and noise produced by leisure activities, even though leisure noise may bring a lot of pleasure.



If you attend clubs, concerts or other loud venues, take earplugs with you. Learn to fit earplugs correctly, because they offer little protection if poorly fitted.

Take "time out" periodically in a quiet area, or limit the amount of time you spend in noise.

If you are listening to your personal stereo with earphones and you can't hear someone speak to you, then the music is too loud. Personal stereos at hazardous volume levels are an increasing cause of hearing damage, particularly among young people.

Noise regulations

The National Occupational Health and Safety Commission sets the national standard for noise exposure in the workplace (www.worksafe.gov.au).

Most States and Territories adopt this national exposure standard. However, you should check with the Occupational Health and Safety authority in your State or Territory for the precise requirements for your workplace.

Noise exposure in the workplace is minimised through risk management, ranging from removal or elimination of the noise source to reliance on

hearing protectors such as ear plugs and/or earmuffs.

What can you do?

Damage to hearing due to noise exposure is cumulative.

This means the higher the noise level and the longer the exposure, the greater the damage. It's like exposure to the sun and ultraviolet radiation.

There is a degree of recovery during non-exposure time, but in the long term, the more exposure, the more damage.

- * Do not deliberately expose yourself to very high sound levels such as noisy machinery or loud rock concerts.
- * If your work place is very noisy, talk to your Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) officer about making it quieter. It is an employer's responsibility to provide a safe work environment.
- * Limit your exposure by reducing the time of exposure and/or the loudness of the noise.
- * If you cannot avoid loud sound, eg mowing the lawn, then you should protect your ears with earplugs or earmuffs. Earplugs are cheap and can be purchased at

a pharmacy or hardware store. Cotton wool does not provide adequate protection.

- * Sudden loud noise, such as explosions, gunfire, loud whistles or sirens can also cause instant and permanent damage to your hearing.
 - * For musicians, who are particularly at risk, a variety of special plugs are available from most hearing aid providers.
- * You should give your ears frequent rest from noise.
- * Be aware that the risk can increase if you are occupationally exposed to solvents or toxins or if you are taking certain drugs as well (particularly some powerful antibiotics).
- * Remember CAT:
 - C** – Cover your ears,
 - A** – Avoid the noise,
 - T** – Turn it down!

LOOK AFTER YOUR EARS. IF YOU DAMAGE YOUR HEARING, IT WON'T COME BACK.

