

How to protect your hearing

Hearing loss doesn't just affect older people: Six ways to protect your ears at any age

MORE than nine million Brits are thought to suffer from some degree of hearing loss, and while it is more common in older people, plenty of younger people have hearing problems too.

The charity Action on Hearing Loss (actiononhearingloss.org.uk) believes as many as four million young Brits are at risk of hearing damage from loud music, for example – which can include tinnitus as well as hearing loss – and is urging them to better protect their ears from prolonged exposure to it.

Hearing protection expert Stephen Wheatley, a trustee of the UK Hearing Conservation Association and CEO of HearAngel/LimitEar, which develops technologies to protect hearing while using headphones, explains that humans have about 15,000 auditory hair cells in each ear at birth, and regular, repeated exposure to large sound doses can cause irreparable damage to them.

“This damage can take a long time to show up and, obviously, the older one gets, the more sound you're likely to be exposed to,” says Wheatley. “You don't get any more of the hair cells and when they're gone, they're gone – and so is your hearing.”

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“This damage can take a long time to show up and, obviously, the older one gets, the more sound you’re likely to be exposed to,” says Wheatley. “You don’t get any more of the hair cells and when they’re gone, they’re gone – and so is your hearing.

“We tend to think of hearing loss as something that affects older people – and often this is the case. However, shockingly, according to the World Health Organisation, not only are 466 million people currently living with disabling hearing loss, but more than a billion young people aged between the ages of 12 to 35 are at risk of hearing loss due to recreational exposure to loud sounds,” he adds.

Want to know how you and your loved ones can protect your ears? Here are Wheatley’s simple tips to lower your sound exposure and protect your hearing at any age...

1. Generally avoid noise

Sometimes, a little peace and quiet is exactly what you need. As



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exposure to sound is calculated as an average over a 24-hour period, those quiet times will help bring the average down and your ears will benefit from a period of no or low-exposure to sound. The obvious time to achieve quiet is when you’re asleep, so make your bedroom environment as quiet as possible. If you live on a busy road, this may be tricky, but double-glazing and heavy-duty blackout curtains can help.

Equally, if you’re spending an evening in a noisy nightclub or at a concert, take a break from the noise occasionally, either by going to a quieter area or perhaps by wearing earplugs for a support band but removing them for the main act.

2. Know your sound dose

How long are you listening for, how loud is it, and what’s the ‘energy’ content of what you’re listening to? These factors combine to give you your sound dose. How does

your sound dose compare with the hearing health recommendations? As a guide, electronic dance music is high energy – lots of beats, few gaps to recover – while speech, with lots of quiet pauses between words, is relatively low energy.

Looking at the recommendations of hearing health experts such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Noise at Work regulations as to what constitutes an acceptable sound level, the magic number is 80.22dB over a 24-hour period. This is your Daily Sound Allowance (DSA®). You need to monitor this to stay safe.

3. Let your device guide you

If you’re listening on your phone or tablet, you’ll probably have noticed the high volume warning – don’t automatically override this, instead think about why it’s there. The current WHO recommendations are to limit your exposure to no more than 85dBA over any eight-hour period. A smartphone can output more than 100dB – and at that volume it’s only safe to listen for around 20 minutes in any eight-hour period before hearing is damaged. So, as pretty much every parent ever has said at some point, turn the volume down!

4. Vary what you listen to

You may love a blast of Metallica to wake you up on your morning commute, but your ears won’t thank you if you continue to listen to such high-energy music all day. Consider your personal sound dose and, as well as spending plenty of time resting your ears without headphones, consider listening to something a little more gentle too. Try a ballad, or perhaps a podcast – variety is good.

5. Don’t listen in noisy environments

When you’re sitting on the train, tube or bus, it’s tempting to plug in your headphones and switch off from the world.

However, you’ll probably find yourself nudging up the volume to block out the extraneous noise so you can hear clearly.

We tend to listen to music at 6-10dB above the level of the background noise.

So, if you’re on an underground train that can reach levels as high as 90-100dB, and attempting to get the volume above that, you are definitely on dangerous ground, hearing-wise.

The best thing you can do when background noise is high is use earplugs or, if you want to listen to something, wear over-ear (preferably noise-cancelling) headphones that block out most of the noise, letting you listen comfortably at lower, less harmful levels.

6. Use noise-cancelling headphones

If you use noise-cancelling headphones, you’ll find that in noisy environments you’ll listen at a lower volume, so you’ll be able to use your headphones three or four times longer, and you’ll be doing your long-term hearing a favour.

Earpiece-type noise-cancelling headphones will reduce ambient noise by a factor of 10, over-ear ones by 20 (their physical shape makes a more effective barrier than in-ear headphones). They work by cancelling out the noise you’re being exposed to, and they make it quieter even if you’re not actually listening to anything. You’ll still have to listen at 6-10dB above the noise ‘floor’ (residual level), but as that will be much lower, the total listening level will be correspondingly lower.

For more information about HearAngel, visit hearangel.com.



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