

Turn Down the Volume: Preventing Hearing Loss

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Life is loud.

Think about noise from the perspective of your ears and the bombardment of sounds heard throughout the day. According to medical experts, we are gradually damaging our hearing. Current research indicates that hearing loss afflicts more than 28 million Americans. For approximately 10 million individuals, these impairments are at least partially attributable to damage from exposure to loud sounds.

The Impact of Noise

Sound is measured in decibels. According to medical professionals, noises above 75 decibels can cause hearing damage. Noise-Induced Hearing Loss (NIHL) can be caused by a one-time, intense impulse, such as an explosion, or by continuous exposure to noise, like that experienced by a lawn mowing crew or workers in a machine shop.

For individuals exposed to continuous high levels of noise, the symptoms of NIHL may appear gradually. Sounds may become distorted or muffled, and it may be difficult to understand other people talking.

Hearing Loss at Work

Hearing loss is one of the most common occupational injuries in the U.S. More than thirty million workers are regularly exposed to toxic noise, and another nine million are at risk for hearing loss from other materials in the workplace. For example, some types of solvents or metals may react with oxygen in the ear and cause NIHL. Hearing loss is the second most common occupational illness or injury reported by workers.

Consequences of Hearing Loss

Hearing loss may also result in a variety of psychological, social, or physical consequences for individuals, including depression, fear, anxiety, paranoia, emotional instability, concentration problems, vertigo, headaches and muscle pain, exhaustion and fatigue, stress and high blood pressure, and eating or sleep disorders.

Savor the Silence

The good news is that hearing loss can be prevented or minimized by following these suggestions:

- Turn down the volume when listening to music, movies and other forms of entertainment, use noise-cancelling ear buds or headphones.
- Purchase disposable foam earplugs—available for about \$1.00 at most pharmacies—to protect your ears from loud noises, such as lawn mowers, power tools, leaf blowers, motorcycles, or fireworks.

- Before attending a loud music concert, action movie, or motor racing event, purchase high-fidelity earplugs. Standard options are available at many music stores, or order custom-fit earplugs from an audiologist (a health professional trained to identify, measure, and treat hearing loss).

Fortunately, there are treatment options for hearing loss. Individuals experiencing some type of hearing problem should seek medical assistance and treatment from an audiologist or otolaryngologist (a physician who specializes in diseases of the ear, nose, throat, head and neck).

Proactive Hearing Protection

The increased volume of our world is raising awareness of the importance of preventing hearing loss. Employers are taking proactive steps to eliminate or reduce excessive noises in the work environment and to remind employees to protect their hearing. They are also encouraging employees to seek routine hearing examinations to establish a benchmark for their hearing or treatment for hearing loss concerns. Many employers across the country are also providing hearing benefit options to employees.

Insurance carriers currently offer several hearing benefit choices, such as discount plans that employers can provide as a voluntary benefit or are incorporating hearing examination procedures into existing medical plan benefits. Since hearing benefits feature high value at a relatively low cost, many employers today are adding this option to their employee benefit packages.

Common Noises That Can Impact Hearing

Noise Risk	Sound Level (in decibels)	Hearing Loss After
Airplane Cabin	110	1 minute, 29 seconds
Ambulance	120	9 seconds
Chain Saw	110	1 minute, 29 seconds
Hand drill	98	23 minutes
Leaf Blower	110	1 minute, 29 seconds
Rock Concert	120	9 seconds
Tractor	96	37 minutes

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