

Turn Down the Music

By Meryl Hyman Harris, HealthDay Reporter

HealthDay

FRIDAY, Feb. 3 (HealthDay News) -- Although it's a great way to block out annoying noises around you, that hot new MP3 player could damage your hearing if you play your favorite tunes too loud and too long.

That's the warning from an expert who notes that while these music listening devices aren't inherently unhealthy, they can cause hearing loss if used improperly.

Paul R. Kileny, director of audiology at the University of Michigan's department of otolaryngology, joins that most famous of rock musicians, Pete Townshend of The Who, in suggesting it's a good idea not to turn the personal music up too loud. Townshend has a hearing loss he blames on the use of screeching earphones.

Kileny advises listeners to use their heads when using their ears.

He notes the players are so comfortable people are inclined to leave them on and turn them up to block out the rest of the world.

"I know people who are plugged into one of these six to eight hours a day," he said.

And it's not just the kids, Kileny said. Last week he was in a gym and wanted to say something to the middle-aged man next to him. He had to ask three times and stand directly in front of the man until the man noticed him and took out an ear bud attached to a player.

Exposure to loud noise can damage the soft tissue of the ear, causing hearing loss. About 10 million Americans have this kind of hearing problem, according to the American Academy of Family Physicians.

Too much noise can also lead to tinnitus, a ringing, whistling or clicking in the ears. The American Tinnitus Association estimates that up to 90 percent of tinnitus patients have some level of noise-induced hearing loss.

The current concern about MP3s is slightly different than previous warnings about loud concerts, or the Walkman you put away when you got the iPod. The difference is one of degree.

Ears recover, or seem to, from raucous rock concerts, though over years of concerts the damage is done, said Kileny. And most people weren't comfortable enough with the weight of a Walkman or clunky headphones to keep them on long enough to do harm, he said.

But iPods and MP3 players are light, fit comfortably into the ear and hold a lifetime of music. That means that, for some, they are irresistible for hours a day -- and that can speed hearing loss, he said.

If conversations and other noises are blocked, the player is too loud, Kileny said. In a written statement, he posited that future generations of the machines might best be fitted with lights or some other notice of excessive decibel measures.

Representatives at Apple and Sony, two of the biggest manufacturers of these appliances, did not respond to questions.

But one industry association agreed with Kileny's advice.

Jennifer Boone, spokeswoman for the Consumer Electronics Association, proffered this caution: "CEA and our manufacturers recommend avoiding prolonged exposure to loud noise. Listen to music at reasonable levels and avoid prolonged exposure."

"It's common sense," said Kileny. "I'm not preaching. What I'm saying is you can do everything in moderation. But if you are going to schedule your life in such a way that you will be coupled to one of these things six hours a day, turn it to a level where you can hear somebody fairly close to you."

More information

Visit the National Institute on Deafness [for more on this topic](#).

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