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## Head-Banger Clangor

*Protect your ears now or forever lose your peace.*

By **JULIE MORIN** 

Noise pollution is epidemic in our society. Blasting stereos, screaming power tools and roaring engines constantly bombard our ears. The danger in all this? Noise irreversibly injures ears, and the result is often a nightmarish and incurable condition called tinnitus.

Tinnitus is an incessant ringing, hissing or buzzing heard in the ears or head. It is a subjective symptom that can range from mild to agonizing. Some people experience a negligible tinnitus that is nothing more than an annoyance, while others are virtually disabled by the cacophony in their heads. People who suffer from constant, severe tinnitus live with head noise every waking moment--they never hear silence. They have difficulty sleeping, concentrating and maintaining employment. The stress of trying to manage relentless head noise can lead to bouts of depression and thoughts of suicide.

According to the American Tinnitus Association, about 50 million Americans suffer from some form of tinnitus, and 12 million suffer severely enough to seek a physician's help. Surprisingly, most tinnitus sufferers admit they never heard of the condition until they got it.

Causes of tinnitus include head and neck injuries and high doses of certain medications. But the most common cause of tinnitus is also the most preventable: exposure to loud sound.

Dr. Stephen Nagler, of the Alliance Comprehensive Tinnitus Clinic in Atlanta, states, "Most people do not have a good handle on the level of sound that can be damaging to the auditory system. Damage caused by noise exposure is accumulative. The tragedy is that the damage is irreversible."

Unfortunately, many of us fail to take auditory damage seriously because we assume that excessive exposure to noise will result in nothing more than a little hearing loss in our senior years.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

While hearing loss is a common result of exposure to loud sound, tinnitus frequently goes hand in hand with injured hearing. The result: relentless head noise that can make a person's life a living hell.

Dr. Jack Vernon, emeritus professor of otolaryngology at the Oregon Health Sciences University, and a pioneer in the study of tinnitus, puts it succinctly: "There are three problems caused by exposure to loud sound: irreparable loss of hearing; tinnitus, which is like a siren blowing in your ear; and hyperacusis, where all sounds are perceived as uncomfortably loud."

There is no cure for tinnitus. There is no pill that brings relief. People who complain to the physicians about tinnitus are often told to go home and live with it--without being told how.

The most alarming increase in tinnitus in recent years is among teens and 20somethings. Exposure to loud sound--on stereos, in dance clubs, at concerts--has made this group extremely susceptible to auditory injury.

States Vernon, "When I first began working with tinnitus patients 27 years ago, the average age of the tinnitus sufferer was 63. Now it's 40. I've worked with tinnitus patients as young as 7."

The symptoms of auditory injury may not show up for months or years after exposure. But just one exposure to loud sound can result in simultaneous and permanent tinnitus and hearing loss.

WHAT CAN BE DONE to prevent tinnitus? First and foremost, take the threat to hearing seriously, and avoid loud sound at all costs. One rule of thumb: If you must raise your voice to be heard above music or machinery, the sound is at a sufficient level to cause damage to the auditory system. However, there is enormous variety in susceptibility to sound, and ears may be damaged at lower levels of noise.

Wear earplugs at concerts and nightclubs, and when using power equipment such as lawn mowers, electric leaf blowers and chainsaws. Musicians should invest in a pair of musician's ear plugs, custom fitted by an audiologist. Do not use firearms, or work around aircraft, without ear protection.

Tinnitus is subjective, and people who do not experience it often question its severity. Yet people who must suffer with this trying condition know full well the torment involved and continually search for relief, understanding--and silence.

In our industrial culture invariably wired for sound, our flippant carelessness with regard to noise has brought a terrible cost to those who suffer--or may one day suffer--from the relentless clamor of tinnitus. But the message must be heeded--lower the volume now or weather the consequences of persistent ear ringing. Buffer the decibels with earplugs, or you may never hear silence again.

Because once the damage is done, it's done--there's no second chance.

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An excellent resource for further information about tinnitus is the American Tinnitus Association (800-634-8978, [www.ata.org](http://www.ata.org)). Additionally, there is a tinnitus hotline (503-494-2187) each Wednesday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. MST.

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