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The best way to prevent hearing loss is to turn down the noise

By STEVE BROWN - Staff Writer
Chico Enterprise-Record

Article Launched:04/23/2007 12:09:29 AM PDT

How do we prevent hearing loss in a world that encourages us to pump up the volume?

"Turn it down!" says audiologist Crystal Chalmers, who operates North State Audiological Services.

"Or wear hearing protection." This means either ear plugs or ear muffs.

Any sound that exceeds 85 decibels is too loud, she said.

We're not just talking about jackhammers, rock music, gun shots, firecracker explosions and sirens. Everybody knows they're loud.

Everyday noises can cause damage, too. "A vacuum cleaner is 95 decibels. A hair dryer and a lawnmower are 100 decibels. Sound systems in movie theaters are 128 decibels.

"If you have to raise your voice to be heard, it's too loud."

She said a muscle in the middle ear tries to prevent excess noise from getting to the cochlea, the part of the inner ear that processes sound. The cochlea is made up of thousands of "hair cells" that wave back and forth in response to sound.

When the noise becomes too much for the middle ear to block, the hair cells will start to break and die off. "They go into shock; they commit suicide."

The need to protect our ears from hearing loss is one of the issues Chalmers will address at a luncheon seminar May 3. She will also discuss balance disorders, aural rehabilitation, auditory training and hearing aid technology. The luncheon is one of four free events North State Audiological Services will offer in May in observance of Better Hearing Month.

Successfully treating hearing loss requires more than fitting people with hearing aids, Chalmers said. "Only 20 percent of people who need hearing aids wear them. They think they won't work or they have trouble using them. But you don't just put hearing aids on people and say good-bye. That's a huge issue."

Hearing aids may make it possible to detect softer sounds, but they don't enhance people's listening skills. "The ears are collectors of sound," Chalmers said. "The cochlea processes it, but the brain is what listens. It takes the information, decodes it, analyzes it and turns it into language."

She said restoring hearing must include training the brain to fill in the gaps the ears are missing. "I have my patients do homework to exercise the brain to help it remember what it used to know."

A condition not necessarily related to hearing loss is tinnitus, a hissing, roaring or ringing in the ears that is not directly produced by an external sound. Chalmers said it can have several causes and there is no cure for it, but therapies are available to help people come to grips with it, some of which attempt to mask the sound.

Excessive ear wax can sometimes make it hard to hear. But Chalmers said people should never put cotton swabs in the ear canal. "It's so easy to damage the ear drum." If a gentle stream of water and mild soap don't dislodge the wax, people should have a doctor remove it, she said. Wax in the ears is normal and even beneficial. "It has anti-bacterial properties. It prevents insects from laying eggs in the ear canal."

Chalmers is a clinical habilitative audiologist and a licensed hearing aid dispenser. She received her master of science degree in clinical audiology from Minot State University in North Dakota in 1981. In 1983, she received a certificate of clinical competence from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. She started North State Audiological Services in 1995.

Chalmers will offer four free events in May in observance of Better Hearing Month.

- A luncheon seminar will be held from noon to 1:30 p.m. May 3 at Enloe Conference Center, 1528 The Esplanade. A catered lunch will be served. Reservations are required and can be made by calling 899-3277.
- Hearing screenings will be held from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. May 4 at the North State Audiological Services office, 15 Jan Court, off Forest Avenue near Raley's Skypark Plaza. No appointment is necessary. Screenings will be done on a first-come, first-served basis.
- A digital hearing aid and cochlear implant exhibition will be from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. May 4, also at Chalmers' office. A cochlear implant is an electronic hearing device, designed to produce useful hearing sensations to a person with severe to profound nerve deafness by electrically stimulating nerves inside the inner ear.
- Hearing and memory rehabilitation workshops will be held from 10 a.m. to noon May 18, also at Chalmers' office. A Listening and Communication Enhancement computer software program will be demonstrated.

Staff writer Steve Brown can be reached at 896-7755 or sbrown@chicoer.com.

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