

[IMAGE]

## **Protect Your Hearing**

By Julie T. Chen, MD

Our hearing is one of those things that we frequently take for granted until we lose it. This is unfortunate and I see it time and time again. Nowadays, it seems that no matter where we go, we are inevitably surrounded by loud music or movies or TV shows. We even pay more money so that we can have louder sounds at the movie theater by seeing higher sound or digital versions of the movie.

So, if we are always surrounded by these auditory assaults, what can we do to protect our hearing?

I once heard that the best way to gauge whether a sound is too loud and is potentially damaging your hearing is to see if you can hear someone else trying to talk to you in his/her normal voice while you are surrounded by the sound. If you can't, then the sound is too loud. If you can still hear others talking to you without him or her shouting at you, then the sound level might be alright. This is of course a rudimentary way to assess any noise level but I find it very useful when instructing my patients and also when reminding myself to protect my hearing.

Thus far, I have talked about the importance of preserving hearing, but the question is why is it so important? I know that sounds plain silly, of course it's important, but let's go over why it's not just important, but that it is essential to you leading a long healthy life long into your twilight years.

Sensorineural hearing loss is the most common type and the type that most people get as you get older. There are some concerns that as people lose their hearing, that quality of life and various mental impacts can occur from not being able to interact socially as well with others. The dangers with crossing streets or driving also come into consideration as hearing loss becomes more prevalent in one's life.

Fortunately, nowadays, there are hearing aids and cochlear implant options but if you are interested, you should definitely check with your physician.

There are other causes of hearing loss due to other diseases and not just aging. Some of these include neurological diseases, tumors, structural issues, frequent ear infections, viral infections, or simply earwax, just to name a few causes. If you are starting to notice hearing loss, the first and most important thing to do

is to see your doctor to be evaluated for all these potential causes.

But if you are simply losing your hearing due to noise trauma over the years, just remember that it's never too late to start protecting what function you have left.

Start by simply making a conscious effort to keep noise levels down when you listen to music to a sound level where you can still hear other people talking to you in normal quiet voice. If you like doing activities where noisy machinery is around you, you need to wear protective hearing gear. Frequent infections can damage your hearing so make sure to address any allergy or infectious issues with your physician to prevent infections. Finally, if you have new headaches or other new neurological deficits besides hearing loss, go see your doctor to make sure that you don't have any tumors or trauma to your head that may be causing this.

Similar to many of our bodily functions, in regards to hearing, you should protect what you have while you have it...don't wait until you are losing it before making efforts to protect it.

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