Nearly Half of Teens Showing Potential Signs of Hearing Loss

Close your eyes and picture what a typical modern teenager looks like. It might be a boy in baggy jeans or a girl in colorful leggings, but there’s a good chance you pictured someone who’s wearing ear-buds. And with such a variety of portable media available to youth, music has never before played such a constant role in the lives of the rising generation.

Since the first rock concerts, parents have worried about their teens’ hearing. But what has changed in the past decade, and is causing concern among hearing care professionals, is these ubiquitous earbuds attached to teens’ music players. When combined with other risky sound sources (power tools, concerts and so on), the potential for hearing loss is greater than it has ever been.

To study the risk teen behavior poses to hearing, Siemens Hearing Instruments recently commissioned ReRez Research of Dallas, Texas to survey 500 American teens, ages 13 to 19, on the subject of risky hearing practices.

The results of the survey are alarming. Teens are engaging in risky aural behaviors, despite knowing the risks, and nearly half (46 percent) have potential signs of hearing loss, including ringing, roaring, buzzing or pain. Despite these stark results, there are simple, common-sense things that teens can do to mitigate the risks.

Methodology
We administered the survey to 500 teenagers throughout the United States, with the numbers evenly divided between females and males. We are 95 percent confident that our findings are accurate within 4.4 percent of the stated numbers.

Dangerous Activities
Our first finding supports the common idea that teenagers are less than vigilant when it comes to protecting their hearing. To measure this, we asked them about their participation in several activities that can damage their ears when done without protection, including the following:

- Listening to loud music with earbuds
- Using household items such as lawn mowers or power tools
- Using motorized toys such as radio-controlled airplanes

Unfortunately, the vast majority of teens engage in these activities to some extent. In fact, we found that about nine in ten, or 88 percent, are involved in at least one or more of these activities.

Teens Know, but Often Ignore the Risks
The idea of parents telling their children to “turn down that racket” is nothing new, even as devices such as powerful earbuds increase our ability to get sound into our ears more efficiently. We asked our teenage respondents if parents or teachers have ever told them that what they’re doing is too loud, and to fix the situation. We also asked how these adults would react if they knew just how loud things get when they are participating in these activities.

In truth, teenagers are indeed aware that what they are doing is risky. The majority of them – 78 percent, or nearly eight in ten – said their parents or teachers would in fact tell them to turn down their music.

And because teenagers don’t always make the wisest decisions for their long-term well being, this can lead to unfortunate consequences.

Evidence of Damage
Noise-induced hearing loss results from prolonged exposure to loud noises, and it presents symptoms like voices sounding muffled, a ringing or roaring in the ears, or pain after listening to loud sounds. And while we’re accustomed to the idea of older people losing their hearing – 30 percent of adults aged 65–75 have hearing loss, according to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) – we found mixed results when it comes to teenagers.

Overall, nearly half of teens reported experiencing ringing, roaring, buzzing or pain after a noisy activity with 17 percent experiencing these symptoms often or all the time.

So what can teenagers to do prevent hearing loss at such an early age?
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Perhaps teenagers aren’t aware that what they’re doing can harm their hearing. So next we asked them about it.

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Mitigating The Risk

**Prevention:** The best way to deal with potential hearing loss, of course, is to make sure it doesn’t happen in the first place. There are several reasonable steps teens can take to stay on the path of good hearing. Buying headphones instead of earbuds, for example, keeps some of the direct sound out of their ears as they listen to music. Other steps include wearing ear protection during activities such as mowing the lawn or even attending concerts (a lot of musicians wear them too – responsibility could be a new fashion trend).

**Stopping future damage:** When teens do experience any hearing loss symptoms like ringing or buzzing in their ears, they should turn down the music or wear ear protection for those activities.

**Help a friend:** Another way to contribute toward good hearing is for teens to warn their friends when they are putting their hearing at risk. Peer pressure can actually work toward their good in this case.

Conclusion

Hearing loss can profoundly impact individuals, communities and nations, with nearly 36 million Americans experiencing it to some degree, according to the NIDCD. Teenagers are well-known for ignoring safety advice, and today’s noisy world is riskier than ever for young ears. By taking a few simple steps and following basic common sense, teens can help keep their sense of hearing intact and prevent the early onset of noise-induced hearing loss.

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