



SOUND ADVICE

Karen van Kampen tunes in to the best tips to protect your hearing

If you find you're rarely unplugged from your MP3 player, pluck out those earbuds and listen up: Nelly Furtado at full volume may be a good way to drown out the realities of your commute to work, but that habit could be hurting your hearing.

Noise is the second leading cause of hearing loss (behind aging), with approximately 10 percent of Canadians affected. Who hasn't cranked up their iPod, danced beside a speaker at a concert or spent hours inside a nightclub that's so loud the bass pulses through your body?

After such indulgences, you're probably left with an annoying ringing in your ears and the sensation that your friends gabbing beside you sound like they're miles away. The technical term for that is temporary threshold shift and it signals that the hair cells inside your inner ear have been shocked. If you don't go clubbing the next night and, instead, give your sensitive ears a rest, they'll usually recuperate, says Rex Banks, audiologist and director of hearing health care at The Canadian Hearing Society.

Banks compares those little hairs to blades of grass. Imagine dragging something heavy across a lawn, which will leave a trail of squashed grass. The next day, the blades will likely spring

back to life, but if you flatten them repeatedly, there's nothing that can make them stand back up. Just like the tiny hairs in your inner ear.

Repeatedly exposing yourself to loud noise will damage those tiny hairs permanently, causing hearing loss. And if that happens, there's nothing you can do to get it back. Hearing loss is forever. "If you're listening to your MP3 player for extended periods of time at loud levels, you're rolling the dice and gambling on your future hearing abilities," says Banks.

So what's too loud? Banks suggests an easy test: turn on your MP3 player and place the earbuds in your palm. Make a fist. If you can still hear the music through your closed hand, it's too loud. Consider, too, that earbuds can be particularly damaging because they deliver sound close to the eardrum, and they don't do a very good job of masking other noises. Noise-cancelling earphones, by contrast, help you keep the volume in check because you're not having to drown out the sounds around you.

Loud noise has a cumulative effect on your hearing, says Chantal Lalonde, manager of audiology and supportive personnel for the Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and

Audiologists. You could be listening to your iPod and have no idea you're damaging your hearing. Then, one day, you might notice you can't hear as well, says Lalonde, and it's too late—the damage has been done.

There is some good news in all of this, however: hearing loss is easily preventable. Follow what's known as the 60/60 rule: no more than 60 minutes of music a day at 60 percent of the volume. If you're plugged in and can't hear someone within three feet talking to you, turn the volume down. The same goes if you have to shout while listening to your music.

If you're in the habit of cranking the volume on your iPod to 109 decibels—consider average conversation to be at 55 decibels—you've got one and a half minutes (less than the average song) before your hearing could be compromised. We're definitely starting to see older ears on younger people, says Banks.

Turns out Apple has tuned in to the problem. The company has introduced a software update to control the maximum volume level on iPods. You can visit the Apple website and download the update for free.

But the best way to protect yourself? Take a break. "I think people need to unplug a bit," says Lalonde. ■