



Taking care of your hearing this summer sounds like a good idea

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By Dr. Kathy Landau Goodman and Gustavo Sanchez

The sounds of summer -- rock concerts, fireworks on July 4 and even listening to iPods at the pool -- are cause for taking precautions to protect hearing. The enhanced decibels generated by such favorite pastimes can contribute to the so-called quiet health crisis of hearing impairment that affects more than 28 million Americans.

In most cases, hearing loss happens gradually and from a variety of reasons, including exposure to loud noises, aging, and as common an occurrence as excessive ear wax production. Another factor that can compound the condition is using items that are inserted into the ear, among them cell phone headsets and audio ear buds. These devices, which are operated for many hours at a time, can create an unhealthy environment in the ear and prohibit the natural expulsion of ear wax, which in itself can lead to hearing troubles. With more than 159 million cell phones in use, the increasing popularity of audio players, and the likelihood of listening with high volume levels, we predict that the nation's hearing crisis will only worsen.

What better time than summer, then, to point out the escalating health issue of hearing loss and how to prevent and treat it. With that in mind, the Audiology Awareness Campaign, a nonprofit foundation dedicated to hearing education, and GlaxoSmithKline, the makers of Debrox Drops ear wax remover, have partnered to educate consumers through a brochure titled "Caring for your Ears and Hearing" that will appear in packages of Debrox Drops this summer. Just as you would slather on sunscreen before heading outdoors to guard against sunburn, we urge you to be similarly cautious with your hearing and follow these tips:

1. Take a baseline hearing test to determine your current hearing status.

Visit a licensed audiologist who can conduct a thorough evaluation of your hearing. Schedule periodic examinations and also meet with the audiologist anytime you suspect a hearing change.

2. Avoid loud noises.

Fireworks are fantastic, and concerts are cool but use hearing protection, such as ear plugs, around loud noises. Noise-induced hearing loss is generally painless, very gradual -- and, unfortunately, permanent. Neither medicine nor surgery can correct the loss.

3. Never put anything into your ears.

Inserting cotton swabs, hairpins or other objects in the ear to remove earwax can damage the ear canal and/or the eardrum, as can scratching the ear. In addition, use caution when wearing ear buds or other in-ear devices because they can push the wax further into the ear canal and cause hearing difficulties.

4. Practice good ear hygiene.

Excessive ear wax can cause temporary hearing loss. Use an ear wax softener as directed and then see an audiologist or physician to determine if the wax has been removed.

5. Protect your head; protect your hearing.

Always wear your seat belt in the car, and wear a helmet when you bike, ski, or skate. These safety habits can lower your risk of head and ear injury.

6. Limit alcohol and cigarettes.

A study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that the risk of hearing loss increases with the number of cigarettes smoked. In addition, scientists concluded that lifelong alcohol consumption can damage central auditory pathways, which is reflected as hearing loss.

7. Wear a hearing aid if recommended.

Only one in five people who could benefit from hearing aids actually wear them. There have been tremendous advancements in the technology of hearing aids and they can vastly improve the quality of life. Consider wearing a hearing aid if recommended by an audiologist.

8. Know where to go for help.

For further information on ears and hearing, to ask an audiologist a question, or to find an audiologist in your area visit audiologyawareness.com or call 888-833-EARS(3277) or visit debrox.com.

(Kathy Landau Goodman, with a doctorate in audiology, is president and founder of Main Line Audiology Consultants in the Philadelphia area. She is chairwoman and director of the Audiology Awareness Campaign since 1998 when the AAC became a nonprofit foundation. Gustavo Sanchez is with Glaxo-SmithKline, makers of Debrox Drops.)

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