

Editor's note: May is Better Hearing Month.

## HAVE YOU HEARD? SUMMER BRINGS HEARING HAZARDS

DALLAS -- Summertime means fireworks displays, lawn mowing, long drives with the windows down and the radio up, open-air concerts, boating trips and jogs or walks with a headset stereo. But these pleasurable summer activities can cause permanent damage to your hearing.

"Noise-induced hearing loss develops so gradually that by the time you notice it, the damage has already been done," said Wende Yellin, an audiologist at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas.

The damage starts with a temporary hearing loss. "When you're exposed to loud noise, as at a rock concert, then come out and things sound stuffy, you're probably experiencing a temporary threshold shift," Yellin said. Normal hearing usually returns in 24 to 48 hours. "But when you keep doing that over and over, the temporary hearing loss becomes permanent."

Hearing dangers are all around at both work and play. Power tools and lawnmowers expose you to a constant stream of loud noise when they're in use. Motorcycles and motorboats also are hearing hazards. Loud music, whether from a car stereo, a rock concert or the headphones from a personal stereo, can cause damage from long exposure. Just one exposure to a very loud noise, such as a gunshot, also can cause permanent damage.

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## Noise-induced Hearing Loss -- 2

Yellin said the hearing loss is subtle at first. "It's a high-frequency loss. You can hear but not understand people, and you may think it's attention-related." People with this kind of hearing loss also have trouble understanding speech against the background noise of a crowded room or a television set. Higher-pitched speech sounds, such as "sh," "t" or "v," aren't clearly heard, which makes it difficult to understand some words. The voices of children and women, which tend to be higher in pitch, become harder to hear.

If the exposure to noise continues, difficulties become more pronounced with time. "The quality of the sound you hear is affected," Yellin said. "Why spend a lot of money on a stereo when the high frequencies are muted and you can't enjoy the music as much?"

Another effect of repeated exposure to loud noise is tinnitus, a ringing in the ears. "Tinnitus can start early," Yellin said, "as soon as any damage to the auditory nerve has been done." Any ringing that does not go away, however, should be checked by a doctor because it could be caused by something other than just noise. Any noticeable hearing loss also should be checked by a doctor or an audiologist because there can be other causes for it as well.

It's fairly easy to tell if a noise is loud enough to cause damage. "If you have to shout to make yourself heard or if you notice any ringing in your ears, it's too loud," Yellin said. Also, if you notice a stuffy feeling in your ears when you leave a noisy place -- as when you go to the restroom in a nightclub -- the sound is too loud. When you're using personal stereo headphones, if someone else can hear the music it may be loud enough to be damaging your hearing. "Anything that causes pain is doing damage," she added.

To prevent noise-induced hearing loss, just turn down the volume. "When it's

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that loud, the sound is distorted and you can't hear it as well anyway," the audiologist said. If you have to be around loud noises, use ear protectors. The best are the ear muff kind used by airport workers, but the small, spongy plugs that fit inside the ear will do. "They're cheap and you can get them by the bag at hunting stores," Yellin said. "Wearing something will help." If you encounter sudden loud noise, closing your ears with your fingers provides some protection on a short-term basis.

Hearing is a precious sense that should be protected, Yellin said, for once it's gone, even modern technology can't replace it. "When people have damage to the auditory nerve, there's distortion to the words they do hear. Even if the sound is made loud enough, as with a hearing aid, they still may have trouble communicating. It's not clearer just because it's louder," she said.

"Hearing aids aren't like normal hearing. Once hearing has been damaged, you can't replace it. It's gone."

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NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School, affiliated teaching hospitals and outpatient clinics.