

SCIENCE

A Billion Young People at Risk of Hearing Loss. How They Can Protect Themselves.

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Young woman with earbud headphones on city street corner with an illuminated billboard at night, London, UK. Credit: Caia Image via Getty Images

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More than one billion young people across the globe could be at risk of hearing loss due to unsafe listening practices.

A study published in BMJ Global Health journal found that people between the ages of 12 and 35 are using listening devices like smartphones and MP3 players at ear-damaging decibel levels. Kate McGinley, co-founder and chief growth officer at Tuned, a hearing health company, told Cheddar News that the rise in reported hearing loss in young people is real.

"Let's be honest, everybody associates hearing loss with the elderly," she said. "But when you look at the clinical data, one in four working age adults has tinnitus. That's a hearing health issue," she said.

Tinnitus, or ringing in the ears, is triggered by whiplash, head injuries, excessive ear wax, or loud sounds. It can also be a side effect of some medications.

For measuring unsafe listening limits, the CDC says listening to noise over 80 decibels, like a gas-powered lawnmower or leafblower, for two hours can damage hearing. The agency also notes that the threshold for instant damage is at or over 120 decibels, like if someone is standing next to a siren.

For perspective, a typical concert averages between 105 and 110 decibels. McGinley pointed out that young people are routinely exposed to loud noise because their way of life calls for it.

"The noise exposure that millennials and Gen Z'ers are experiencing today, it isn't necessarily about loud music venues. It's become a reality of work. If you think about it, you're probably wearing headsets for hours a day on any given day," she said. "Unless you're in a very quiet room, you're wearing a headset because there's background noise."

She also said it's not just happening in the office. Loud noise also crops up during events like gym sessions and travel.

While there are many different types of headphones on the market, McGinley told Cheddar News that there isn't much distinction in safety between over-the-ear headphones and those that are insertable. Lowering the level of noise for extended periods of time is crucial.

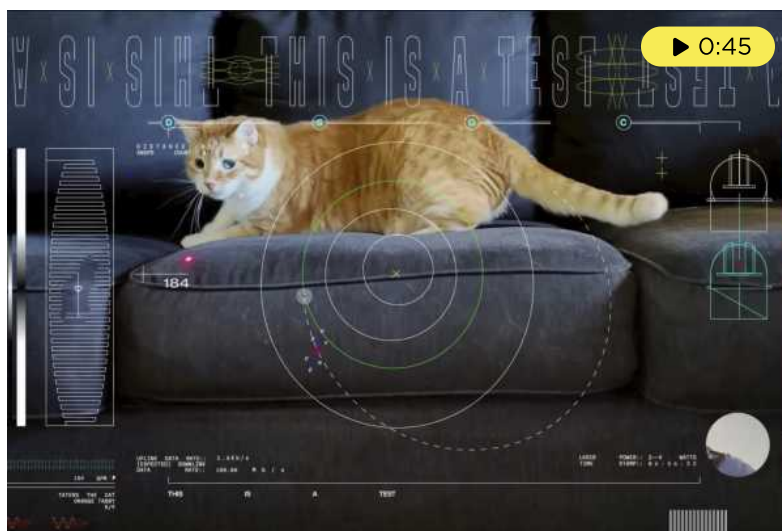
When it comes to hearing safety in open spaces, there are tools on the market that can assess the volume. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health [NIOSH] created the Sound Level Meter App which measures sound and provides suggestions on safe listening levels.

McGinley said she's grown accustomed to using the app in public spaces to check how noise levels are impacting her hearing. While the NIOSH app is only available on iOS, there are several options to choose from in the Google Play store as well.

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