

Hearing is precious and fragile

The Health Column

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One in six Australians is deaf or hearing impaired or has a chronic ear disorder. National Hearing Awareness Week is an event held in the last week of August each year (20-27th August 2016). It provides an opportunity to raise community awareness of hearing impairment and ways to protect your hearing. It is hosted by the members of the Deafness Forum of Australia. It also serves as a reminder that the ears are much more than a couple of fairly useful appendages on either side of our head. Hearing



Awareness Week also provides an opportunity for the 22 percent of Australians aged 15 and over who have a hearing impairment to share their experiences and knowledge and help to create a greater understanding of their needs, aspirations and the contributions they can make to our nation.

The ear is a complex piece of equipment consisting of many parts – not just the visible exterior section – and is responsible not only for hearing but for maintaining balance as well. The outer ear captures sound waves which are converted into mechanical energy by the ear drum and the tiny muscles and bones in the middle ear. The inner ear changes this mechanical energy into nerve impulses which are then transmitted to the brain. These nerve impulses are the messages we decipher as sound.

Semi-circular tubes or canals within the inner ear act like spirit levels and provide us with our sense of balance.

It's not surprising that with such a complicated system things can go wrong. In fact, ear problems are very common and they can be due to many causes. Some causes are very much self-inflicted. Industrial deafness has long been recognised as a work health and safety hazard. However, research has now shown that whether it's a power tool or loud music, the negative impact on the ears is just the same.

The Hearing Awareness Week website (www.hearingawarenessweek.org.au) has identified a whole host of possible factors which are likely to cause damage to the ears – from jackhammers to jet skis, from fruit juicers to formula one racing – and describes the maximum safe exposure time without ear protection. Visit the website to find out 'how loud is too loud' with respect to your favourite electrical device or music event.

In fact, consistent exposure to loud music is the most common cause of hearing loss. It could be a portable music player or a rock concert; in any event, it's an easily preventable cause. Unfortunately, as the deafness may not become apparent for some years, treatment is often initiated far too late.

'Noise destroys – turn down the volume' is also the message to come from the Australian Tinnitus Association. Tinnitus literally means noise or ringing in the ears, but the constantly annoying sound that many sufferers live with 24 hours a day takes many forms. Many of us experience tinnitus from time to time, but for a small percentage of the population it can be severe and quite disturbing.

Apart from noise there are some other possible aggravating factors for tinnitus. Some medicines, notably anti-inflammatory and anti-depressant medicines, have been identified as potential causes. Caffeine (found in tea, coffee, soft drink or chocolate) and alcohol may worsen tinnitus in some people. Smoking (which narrows the blood vessels that supply vital oxygen to the ears), can also make tinnitus worse.

Tinnitus can often be managed or controlled reasonably well; even so, a cure doesn't really seem close at hand. However, treatment for some other common ear problems is often much easier, provided the cause can be identified early on. The *Ear Problems* Self Care Fact Card available from pharmacies throughout Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information can help with hints on how to reduce the risk of ear problems and treat those problems effectively when they do occur.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au/programs-for-pharmacists-and-pharmacies/self-care-program, then click 'Find a Self Care pharmacy near you'.