



How loud is too loud?

Self Care principal adviser and spokesperson John Bell

National Hearing Awareness Week is an annual event held in the last week of August. It provides an opportunity to raise community awareness of hearing impairment and ways to protect your hearing.

It's a reminder also that the ears are much more than a couple of fairly useful appendages either side of our head. The ear is a complex piece of equipment consisting of many parts – not just the visible exterior section. And the ear 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 different sounds.

Semi-circular tubes or canals within the inner ear, acting like a series of spirit levels, also give us our sense of balance.

It's not surprising that with such a complicated system things might 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 an occupational health hazard; but researchers have now shown that whether it's a power tool or loud music the adverse affects on the ear are 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 jack hammers to jet skis, from fruit juicers to formula one racing – and it describes the maximum safe exposure time without ear protection. You can check “how loud is too loud” with respect to your favourite electrical or mechanical appliance.

In fact, consistent exposure to loud music is the most common cause of hearing loss. It could be an iPod style player or a pop concert; in any event, it's an easily preventable cause, but 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 ringing or tinkling in the ears, but the constantly annoying sound that many sufferers live with 24 hours a day takes many forms. It might also be a hissing or whistling sound. It might be like living with the summer sound of cicadas all year round.

Many of us experience tinnitus from time to time; but for maybe 2% 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 quinine and possibly anti-inflammatory medicines – may be a cause. Caffeine (in tea, coffee, cola or chocolate) and alcohol may worsen tinnitus in some people. And smoking (it narrows the blood vessels which supply vital oxygen to the ears), can 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 recently up-dated *Ear Problems* Fact Card will help with some hints on how to reduce the risk of ear problems and treat those problems effectively when they do occur. The Card is available from pharmacies throughout Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information.



For the location of your nearest Self Care Pharmacy phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 or log on to the Pharmaceutical Society's website: www.psa.org.au. Click on "Self Care" then "Find a Self Care Pharmacy".