Hearing loss is affecting an increasing number of Americans of all ages—including children. Here’s what you must do to prevent it.

**What’s Too Loud?**

Hearing loss may be caused by one-time exposure to extremely loud sound (such as an explosion) or by exposure to loud sounds over months or years. Loudness, or sound intensity, is measured in decibels (dB). The scale runs from 0 dB (which is the faintest sound a human ear can detect) to more than 180 dB (the noise at a rocket launch). Decibels are measured on a logarithmic scale, meaning that every increase by units of 10, each is 10 times the lower figure. So 40 decibels is 1000 times as intense as 10 dB.

- 30 dB: a whisper
- 50 dB: the sound of heavy rainfall
- 60 dB: normal conversation
- 70 dB: rush-hour traffic
- 85 dB: lawnmower
decibel (dB) level
- 90 dB: subway trains; lawn-mower
- 100 dB: power saws, drills
- 115 dB: sandblasting; loud rock concert
- 130 dB: race-car noise
- 140 dB: jet engine
- 150 dB: fireworks
- 170 dB: shot-gun blast

The cumulative effect of the type of music, the higher intensity of the sound and the longer duration of exposure is a recipe for hearing loss. What to do? A simple rule of thumb, says Garstecki, is, “If you can’t hear the people around you, it’s too loud.” And if switching from Eminem to Mozart is out of the question, Garstecki recommends following the 60/60 rule: Play the music at no more than 60 dB of the maximum volume (that’s about as loud as over half way between the “off” and the “max”), for no more than 60 minutes.

Getting more snug-fitting ear phones, or using the more old-fashioned ones that cover the entire ear is also an option. They are safer and a cool look—if this were still 1964.

**Stay Cool, Listen Smart**

When children are hearing what you’re hearing, it’s too loud.

- 30 dB: a whisper
- 50 dB: the sound of heavy rainfall
- 60 dB: normal conversation
- 70 dB: rush-hour traffic
- 85 dB: lawnmower
- 90 dB: subway trains; lawn-mower
- 100 dB: power saws, drills
- 115 dB: sandblasting; loud rock concert
- 130 dB: race-car noise
- 140 dB: jet engine
- 150 dB: fireworks
- 170 dB: shot-gun blast

The cumulative effect of the type of music, the higher intensity of the sound and the longer duration of exposure is a recipe for hearing loss.

What to do? A simple rule of thumb, says Garstecki, is, “If you can’t hear the people around you, it’s too loud.” And if switching from Eminem to Mozart is out of the question, Garstecki recommends following the 60/60 rule: Play the music at no more than 60 dB of the maximum volume (that’s just about as loud as over half way between the “off” and the “max”), for no more than 60 minutes.

Getting more snug-fitting ear phones, or using the more old-fashioned ones that cover the entire ear is also an option. They are safer and a cool look—if this were still 1964.

**All loud music is bad, whatever the listening device. Be a role model and teach children from an early age to avoid loud noises.**

Hearing loss is increasing among adolescents, and some experts blame the growing popularity of the iPod and other MP3 players. The problem begins the minute the, those hip and small earphones that fit directly into the ear, with the potential of reaching an intensity of 110 dB, the sound level of a rock concert, according to audiologist Dr. Kathy Peck, executive director and co-founder of HEAR (Hearing Education and Awareness for Rockers) and a self-described crusader—always carries a few earplugs to gear events and at spring-break events and at clubs and rock concerts, at NASCAR races and rock concerts, at NASCAR races and music, by whatever listening device, it can cause hearing loss. Volume, not musical taste, is what matters. “All loud music is bad, whether it’s rock, rap or classical, says Dr. Galen Whitelaw, an audiologist from Columbus, Ohio, and president of the American Academy of Audiology.

Noise-induced hearing loss affects as many as 10 million Americans, according to the academy. Essentially, all loud noise does to your ears what fire can do to your skin; it burns it. Noise “destroys the novel endings in the middle ear,” says Dr. Ward. These are the tiny “hair cells” that translate vibrations into electrical currents that go to the brain. Damage them, and your hearing suffers.

A single exposure to a very loud noise can do it—an explosion, say, or a gunshot. On the other hand, the constant exposure to the whine and grind of machinery over several years can be enough to wreck your hair cells.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health says approximately 30 million workers are exposed to dangerous noise on the job. Unfortunately, Dr. Ward notes, once the damage is done, it is permanent.

The good news is that this kind of hearing loss is preventable simply by avoiding the level of noise that causes damage. What’s too loud? There’s a good way to tell, says Dr. Ward: “Anything that causes discomfort.”

Other indicators: A noise is too loud if it prevents normal conversation; if you have to shout to be heard above the noise; or if you have difficulty hearing for several hours after exposure to it.

While these warning signs may seem to be common sense, many ignore them, because hearing loss usually kicks in so gradually—sometimes over 10 to 20 years. In fact, according to Dr. Whitelaw, a person with hearing loss waits an average of seven years to do something about it. Eventually, however, the condition forces people to see a doctor—often under pressure from family members. It’s often a spouse who’ll say, “The television is much too loud,” notes Whitelaw. Or, “I was knocking on the door and no one answered.”

Here’s what to do if you’re worried about hearing loss.

See a physician. You first need to make sure that your hearing loss is not a result of...