

Study says parents could do more to protect kids' ears

KATHRYN DOYLE

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Teenagers are at risk for serious long-term hearing problems caused by excessively loud music or other loud noises. But parents don't always grasp the gravity of the situation, or talk to their kids about it, according to a new study.

"I think parents are only recently becoming aware of the dangers of excessive noise exposure," said study author Dr. Deepa L. Sekhar, a pediatrician at Penn State College of Medicine in Hershey, Pa., adding that parents often ask her about this issue.

One in eight American children and teenagers – or more than five million – has a type of hearing loss that usually stems from overexposure to loud noises, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Parents can help prevent much of that hearing loss, the researchers said.

For the new study, they collected Internet survey responses from more than 700 parents of teenage children. Almost 70 per cent of the parents had not spoken with their child about noise exposure, mainly because they thought the actual risk of hearing damage was low.

But almost an equal number reported being willing to limit time listening to music and access to other excessively noisy situations to protect their teenager's hearing, according to results published in JAMA Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery.

On the whole, parents seemed willing to take steps to protect their kids, but often underestimated the risks of too much loud music. “I think it just means that we have work to do in terms of raising awareness,” Sekhar said.

More educated parents and those with younger teens were most likely to be willing to take precautions with their kids, like limiting music time, limiting access to noisy situations or insisting on protective measures like earplugs.

Teen hearing loss is a serious problem, said Dr. Robert V. Harrison, a senior scientist who studies hearing at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, and was not involved in the new study.

Some teens have enough damage to have trouble communicating, he said, or they have ringing in the ears, which is a sure sign of damaged nerve cells in the parts of the brain devoted to hearing. “But for many, the problem lies in the future 10, 20, 30 years ahead when ‘normal’ age-related hearing loss comes earlier or is accelerated,” he said.

Parents often ask Sekhar what volume is safe, but that’s a tough question to answer, she said. “At this point it is difficult to give parents an exact volume level specifically because it is both the volume and the length of the exposure that impact hearing in the long run,” she said.

Parents could think about making use of volume-limiting headphones and volume controls on portable listening devices. They should also talk with their teen about using hearing protection in places where it is clear there is going to be a lot of noise, like concerts, shop class or outside while mowing the lawn.

“For example, one of the big things I see is teens mowing the lawn over the summer with their earbuds in,” Sekhar said. “Think about how loud a lawnmower is and how high the volume has to be turned up on the iPod for them to hear over that noise.”

Raising awareness that hearing protection is important is a good place to start, she said. The more parents know, the more likely they will be to step in.

“Parents cannot control what their teens listen to any more than they can control that their teenager wears a seatbelt each time he or she drives the car,” Sekhar said. But hearing health should be included in family discussions about general health and safety, she said. “I think we all hope that we give our children the foundation, knowledge and support to make good decisions for their health.”