Personal Music Players: Scientists Warn Of Health Risks From Exposure To Noise

LISTENING to personal music players at a high volume over a sustained period can lead to permanent hearing damage, according to an opinion of the EU Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENIHR) released this week.

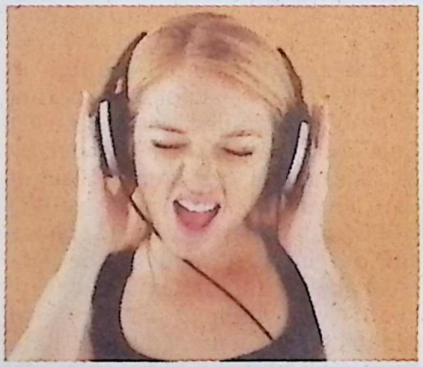
The scientific opinion shows that 5-10% of personal music player listeners risk permanent hearing loss, if they listen to a personal music player for more than one hour per day each week at high volume settings for at least 5 years. The European Commission had asked the independent scientific committee to examine this issue, given the widespread use of personal music players and the surge in the number of young people exposed to such noise. Scientists confirm that there is cause for concern and the European Commission will now examine with Member States and stakeholders, possible measures that could be taken to better protect children and adolescents from exposure to noise from personal music players and other similar devices.

EU Consumer Affairs Commissioner Meglena Kuneva, said, "I am concerned that so many young people, in particular, who are frequent users of personal music players and mobile phones at high acoustic levels, may be unknowingly damaging their hearing irrevocably. The scientific findings indicate a clear risk and we need to react rapidly. Most importantly we need to raise consumer awareness and put this information in the public domain. We need also to look again at the controls in place, in the light of this scientific advice, to make sure they are fully effective and keep pace with new technology."

How can listening to music harm hearing?

Today, adults as well as adolescents and children are increasingly exposed to loud sounds in their leisure time, notably through the use of personal music players.

Studies on young people among the general population have not found an increase in hearing loss over the last few decades. However, some authors stress that if young people continue to listen to music for long periods of time and at high volume levels during several years, they



run the risk of developing hearing loss by the time they reach their mid-twenties.

Listening to music from personal music players at maximum volume settings for a few hours can produce a slight temporary hearing loss. Over several years, repeated daily exposures to relatively loud sounds may result in permanent effects, but findings are contradictory. To establish whether exposure of teenagers to music from personal music players may influence their hearing once they get older, long-term studies using more sensitive methods are needed.

What consumers can do?

Personal music player users can already take certain very practical precautions, such as checking their device to see if a maximum volume can be set so as to keep the volume lower, or they can lower the volume manually, and they can take care not to use the personal music player for prolonged periods in the interest of their hearing.

Background

It is well recognised that long-term exposure to excessive sound can harm hearing. To protect workers, limits have been set for the levels of noise allowed in the workplace. Environmental sounds to which the general public is exposed - such as noise from traffic, construction, aircrafts or from the neighbourhood - can be very irritating but are in most cases not loud enough to harm hearing.

In the last few years, leisure noise has become a significant threat to hearing because it can reach very high volumes and because an increasing proportion of the population is exposed to it, particularly young people. There has been increasing concern about exposure from the new generation of personal music players which can reproduce sounds at very high volumes without loss of quality. Risk for hearing damage depends on sound level and exposure time.

In recent years sales of personal music players have soared, in particular those of MP3 players. Overall, in the EU, it is estimated that roughly 50 to 100 million people may be listening to portable music players on a daily basis. In the last four years, estimated units sales range between 184-246 million for all portable audio devices and range between 124-165 million for MP3 players. Across the EU, many millions of people use personal music players daily and, if they use them inappropriately, they put themselves at risk of hearing damage.

Source: ScienceDaily