



Noise pollution has lasting health effects

By Penny Musco

THE WORD "NOISE" is derived from the Latin word *nausea*, and little wonder: The World Health Organization's "Guidelines for Community Noise" says noise literally is making us sick. Hearing loss, cardiovascular disease, impaired task performance and sleep disturbances are among its numerous adverse health effects, making noise a pervasive public health problem.

Unfortunately, the cacophony that bombards us daily—from jet planes down to our iPods—often goes unnoticed. "Our nervous system evolved as a way to alert us to threats in the environment, so when we hear sound, our brains interpret it as the possibility of a threat," explains Costco member Dr. Louis Hagler, whose 2007 report, published in the *Southern Medical Journal*, summarized scientific studies on the subject. Although our bodies still respond in harmful ways, "we've become so surrounded by noise that we basically don't even recognize it anymore," he says.

It was the Industrial Revolution that jump-started the rise in decibel level, maintains George Prochnik, author of *In Pursuit of Silence: Listening for Meaning in a World of Noise* (Doubleday, 2010). "Manufactured noise" was introduced, and the invention of automobiles and aircraft only added to the din. Eventually, Prochnik says, people tried to "control noise by making their own noise"—with blaring car radios, boomboxes, personal

listening devices and even background music in restaurants. He notes that the result is "we've allowed our public spaces to become sonic dumping grounds."

Know your noises

"Noise-caused hearing loss is the most common preventable hearing loss," says Gordon Hughes, a board-certified ear, nose and throat doctor—a loss that he says is invisible, cumulative and gradual. "It's like sun: Skin cancers from sun don't appear for decades, and usually the result of noise damage doesn't appear for decades."

He gives everyday examples of how the

combination of sound intensity and duration of contact wreaks havoc on our ears. A hair dryer, for instance, can reach 120 decibels (dB). But since it's usually held away from the head and for only a few minutes, repeated use is most likely not a problem (but he does recommend using the lowest setting). Operating a power drill, though, at 100 dB, for an hour, perhaps in a small workspace where sound reverberates, can lead to trouble. So can the repetitive racket of lawn mowers and leaf blowers.

For children, recurring exposure to clanging toys and video games, booming

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Shhhhhhhhhhh!

AUGUST 15 IS National Relaxation Day, and a good time to launch your own pursuit of silence.

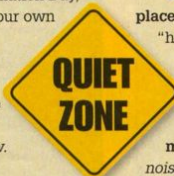
● **Make ear protection available for recreation and home use for the entire family, and teach children good listening habits** (www.noisyplanet.nidcd.nih.gov).

● **Enhance your aural experience in nature** (www.nature.nps.gov/sound/enhance.cfm).

● **Promote hearing-friendly workplaces** (www.osha.gov/SLTC, search "hearing conservation"; www.cdc.gov, search "noise pollution") and schools (quietclassrooms.org).

● **Use quieter appliances and sound-dampening building materials** (consumerreports.org; noisefree.org/quietproducts.php).

● **Advocate for community parks** (www.nipa.org).—PM



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MP3 players and iPods, earsplitting concerts, and, yes, shrill band instruments, all add up. "The younger you start with potential noise damage, it's probably permanent," warns Hughes, who is also program director for clinical trials at the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, part of the federal government's National Institutes of Health.

How loud is it?

	Avg. decibels
Rocket launch	180
12-gauge shotgun	156
Fireworks	150
Jet plane	120
Rock concert	112
Leaf blower	105
Chain saw	100
Traffic	82
Hair dryer	75
Washing machine	70
Speech	62

Noises off

What to do? Once we understand the potential damage these various activities can have, we must protect ourselves, says Hughes. To combat the aural assault, he advises that unless exposure is going to be "very brief and very rare," ear protection should be worn. He recommends foam inserts or earmuff-style devices for most people.

And after our hearing is taken care of, Prochnik suggests we then look around for ways to address the overall volume in our world. Instead of being against noise, though, he promotes a pro-silence approach.

Prochnik's a big fan of pocket parks—also known as miniparks and vest-pocket parks—tiny oases carved out of vacant lots, which promote refreshment and retreat amid a neighborhood's clamor. He believes that providing places to experience tranquility draws communities together, and is not only a longer-lasting solution but ultimately a more fulfilling one. "We make more progress by switching our focus away from noise and toward silence," he concludes.

How about a (quiet) round of applause for that? 🙌

Penny Musco finds quiet in the national parks, and blogs about them at www.pennymusco.com.

The Costco Connection

Costco members will find earplugs, noise-canceling headphones and Hearing Aid Centers at most Costco locations (see the Specialty Services list on page 96 for exact locations).