

Don't Crank up the Tunes!

Experts warn the iPod craze may result in a deaf generation.

by Joseph Patrick Pascale

"I know Steve used to blast his music, and now he realizes he's going deaf, so he doesn't listen to it as loud," said Peter Katz, a junior at Ramapo College of New Jersey, speaking of his younger brother. A recent study by the Royal National Institute for the Deaf in the United Kingdom has shown that thousands of music fans who listen to their tunes on iPods and other brands of MP3 players are putting themselves at a high risk of losing their hearing in the future.

"I think hearing loss is a major problem if you have prolonged exposure," said Steve Katz, a music major at New Jersey's County College of Morris. "If you just listen to it occasionally like most people, you're fine. But if you're like me and you listen to it for a couple hours every day, then it could be a problem."

"Risk for hearing loss is related to loudness, duration, and sensitivity to ear trauma," said audiologist Michele Wilson, Ph.D. "This risk is the same for any auditory stimuli, be it live music, industrial noise, or headset. The key variables are the intensity, frequency, range of the exposure, and duration." Loudness and duration were the two biggest issues in the RNID study, which said that listeners should not listen to their iPods above 90 decibels (which is only about 2/3 of the iPod's maximum volume), and it should not be listened to for more than one hour per day. A French law now requires that Apple and other manufacturers make their MP3 players unable to go louder than 100 decibels, which is now the standard for most manufacturers across Europe. According to the American Auditory Society, American iPods can reach a maximum of 121 decibels.

"An hour a day? Wow, that's not very long," said Sandra Johnson, a freshman at the University of Arizona. "I don't think it'd be a problem [for me], but it'd be hard to do. I wouldn't do it just because experts say to." However, not everyone thought limiting music to an hour per day was a problem. "I have about an hour drive when I listen to music every day. After that I have a headache," said Peter Katz.

How did they feel about only listening to their iPod at 2/3 the volume? "It's a double edged sword," said the younger Katz. "Sometimes you have to play it loud. If it only goes up to 50 decibels, you're not going to hear it over the noise. But then, that's also good because you're not going to damage your ears." Josh McLaughlin, a senior at the Art Institute of Philadelphia, expressed similar opinions. "I guess that's ok as long as it's really quiet around," McLaughlin said, but he added that living in the city, he often has to turn up his iPod to ignore the loud noises surrounding him.

None of the students interviewed felt that a law should be enforced to lower the decibel level. "I don't think they should regulate it," said the older Katz brother. "If people want to listen to their music loud, let them. They know the damage it can cause."

A solution may be available in the form of a newer generation of headphones. Many companies now make noise-cancelling headphones. According to a review on the popular technology website CNet.com, the tiny microphones on the outside of the headphones detect the noise around them before they reach the listener's ears. Then the microphone puts out a signal to invert the sound wave so the listener never hears it. This enables a listener to listen to their music at a safe volume because without outside noise

interrupting, there is no need to turn the music up louder just to hear it. Bose, Sony, and Panasonic all make these headphones, but at between \$100 and \$300 they're not exactly a cheap solution.

"I think if they made that technology more standard there would be less problems," said the older Katz. "That's the reason you crank it – you can't hear it. With outside noises cancelled it probably wouldn't be a problem." His brother and McLaughlin said that until the price came down, the technology wouldn't make an impact. "Most young people won't be worried about something that is going to happen in 10 years or more," said McLaughlin. "They just want to buy the cheapest one with the best sound."

Johnson said she did not like the idea. "If you have headphones that cancel out everything, you aren't going to pay attention to your surroundings," she said. "You won't hear people, you'll be off in your own little world, and you'll probably get run over because you won't be paying attention."

However, Steve Katz is already experiencing the first signs of hearing loss from his years of music. "I notice a really low ringing," Katz said. "I don't know much about it, but I assume it's canceling out frequency so that other things at the same frequency of the ring might be difficult to hear." Katz remains optimistic since he's cut back on his music. "Since I can't really notice, I don't think it's a serious problem – hopefully it will go away after while."