

Why You Shouldn't Keep Quiet About Neighborhood Noise

--by Ike Eastvold, FHNA Noise Issues Coordinator

More than 30 million Americans are exposed to hazardous sound levels on a regular basis, often without realizing it, and are slowly losing more and more of their hearing.

Audiologists are noticing that an increasing number of their patients are people in their 50s and 60s who are losing their hearing due to noise, as opposed to age. Some have worked in noise environments or were exposed to loud explosions in the military; but others simply may have attended too many loud rock concerts in their youth or ridden motorcycles with illegally modified mufflers.

A City like Albuquerque which has become almost totally dependent on the automobile has increasing noise levels from boom boxes, car alarms, illegal noise-making mufflers on cars and motorcycles, illegal semi truck "jake braking," and the huge expansion of traffic volumes.

Exposure to excessive noise, such as traffic noise from San Mateo, has well-documented health consequences. Noise increases blood pressure, accelerates breathing, disturbs digestion, intensifies the effects of drugs and alcohol and disrupts sleep, even after the noise stops. Noise can also cause fatigue, irritability and upset stomach or ulcers.

Children in schools with elevated noise environments learn more slowly than children in quieter school areas, and noise has been shown to retard language learning in small children

Experts say sounds louder than 80 decibels can damage sensitive hair cells in the soft tissue of the inner ear which relay sound waves to the brain. Sometimes it takes only one exposure to cause lasting damage. Once damaged, those hair cells don't recover.

Do you need help to hear?

Warning signs that you have been exposed to noises that are too loud and may need to see a hearing professional for help:

- >You hear a ringing or buzzing (tinnitus) in your ears.
- >You have pain in your ears after leaving a noise area.
- >You often complain that people mumble when they talk.
- >You often ask people to repeat what they said.
- >Others say you play the TV or radio too loudly, or that you talk louder than necessary for normal conversation.

Sources: American Speech and Hearing Association, www.asha.org

Noise Pollution Clearing House, www.nonoise.org