

Falling on deaf ears

Hearing loss is on the rise, but sufferers are reluctant to help themselves, writes **Fran Molloy**.

Next time you roll your eyes at a passing car blasting "doof doof" music, take pity – the occupants are adding decades to the age of their ears.

"There are people as young as 18 these days who have the sort of hearing loss that you would expect to find in an 80-year-old," says Brian Rope, the CEO of Australia's Deafness Forum.

Some researchers believe Australia is facing a silent epidemic of hearing loss. In the next few decades, impaired hearing is likely to affect up to half of the Australian population, many aged between 20 and 40.

Dr Harvey Dillon is director of Australia's National Acoustic Laboratories, the Federal Government's hearing research organisation, and notes that traditionally, there is a strong correlation between age and hearing loss.

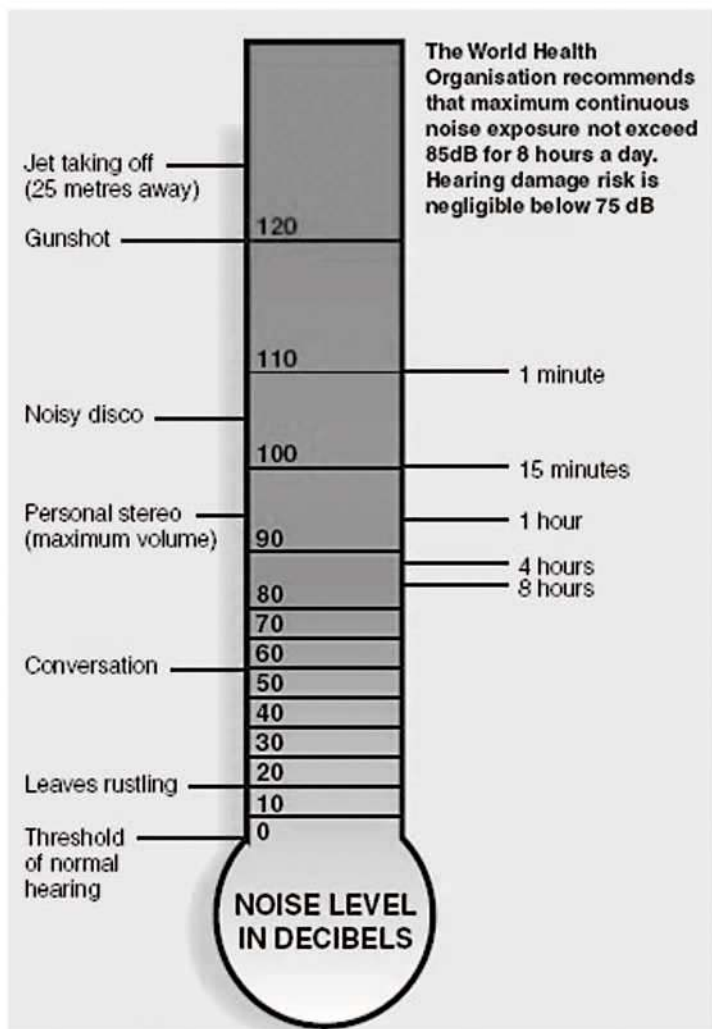
"Usually, from the age of 15 to around 50 years it's less than 3 per cent of the population. From 51 to 60, about 15 per cent of the population report mild hearing loss, but from 61 to 70 years, it's nearly 50 per cent and from 71 plus, it's more than 60 per cent."

The nation's 5 million-plus baby boomers, now aged in their mid-40s and older, however, are likely to become deafer, sooner – and noise injury is a major cause.

Audiologist Celene McNeill has been advising people with hearing loss for more than 20 years. At her Bondi Junction clinic, she is now treating many more people in their 40s, and younger, for tinnitus (a chronic buzzing or ringing noise in the ears).

About 90 per cent of these people also have hearing loss. However, many are reluctant to wear hearing aids to treat the associated hearing loss, mainly because of vanity.

Tinnitus can be treated with hearing aids and can also be treated by listening to a masking



THE ABOVE NOISE LEVELS ARE APPROXIMATE AND SHOULD ONLY BE TAKEN AS A GUIDE
SOURCE: AUSTRALIAN HEARING

device for several hours a day over a number of months.

"A common issue with baby boomers who are experiencing hearing loss is that they don't want it to be visible," McNeill says. "They usually come because of tinnitus, which can be a real annoyance."

"They often say, 'I don't want to know about the hearing loss. I'm not old – just treat the tinnitus.'"

Hearing aids, she adds, carry far more negative societal perceptions than spectacles.

In the US, increased attention has been focused on hearing loss in baby boomers, particularly since former president Bill Clinton outed his own deafness and was fitted with two hearing aids in 1999. Clinton blamed his hearing loss on loud bands and helicopters.

A 2004 report, *The Baby Boomer Hearing Loss Study*, indicated half of the 76 million US baby boomers between the ages of 40 and 59 are experiencing some degree of hearing loss.

The study follows 2002 research by the US National Center for Health Statistics showing that baby boomers had 26 per cent more hearing loss than those in previous generations.

The increase in hearing loss is significantly greater for men and has been associated with occupations that involve exposure to high noise levels. Other causes are thought to include drug and inhalant use, loud leisure activities (shooting, car-racing, woodwork) and exposure to chemicals such as benzene.

There has been no comparable research into hearing loss in Australia, but the Deafness Forum of Australia estimates that 22 per cent of the Australian population suffers from some level of hearing loss – and it's not just the boomers who are at risk.

The most comprehensive research related to the prediction of hearing loss in Australia was a 1994 study by the National Acoustic Laboratories.

Dr Eric LePage, one of the three research scientists who conducted the study, developed the "otoacoustic emission test" – which measures the responsiveness of the hair cells in the inner ear, to a gentle "click". The test can provide early warning of the risk for permanent hearing loss before disability sets in.

The 1994 study performed about 6000 ear function tests, with some striking results.

"In the ageing characteristics, there was a significant dip in ear function for those between the ages of 15 and 30. That was in 1993. Since that time, we have collected more data, and that picture doesn't appear to have changed very much," LePage says.

The study predicted that significant levels of hearing loss would occur in the Australian population within two decades – and this hearing loss was associated primarily with noise exposure.

Twelve years later, however, the predictions are untested.

"There has been no study to follow up on our predictions since that time," says LePage, who has since left the National Acoustic Laboratories to form a private research organisation, OAEricle.

Dr Harvey Dillon confirmed the extent of hearing loss in Australia's population was unknown. "We haven't done any direct population surveys at all," he says.

Protect Your Ears

- Avoid loud noises, particularly loud bangs.
- Wear ear protection when operating machinery or noisy equipment.
- Keep the volume down on your personal stereo.

- Going to a concert, car-races or fireworks? Take ear-plugs.
- Check out the risk factor of solvents or toxins you're exposed to at work.
- Give your ears frequent rest.

Source: Australian Hearing