

Pardon me?

Staying fit is important to Jane Langille. But she didn't realize the pounding beats driving her regular workouts were damaging her hearing. How Spin class led to tinnitus

I LOVE THE pumping rock beat in my Spinning class. It keeps me on pace, ensuring a good cardio burn. The instructor cranks up the stereo in the small room that holds 15 bikes, donning her microphone so the class can hear her instructions over the music. It's a blast, literally.

I'm the keen one, front row centre, with my cleats locked into the pedals, ready to grind. But you will notice something else — I'm the only one sporting bright orange foam earplugs.

These accoutrements are certainly not a fashion statement, nor a criticism of the music. After all, I am part of the generation that grew up believing louder is better. I had my first Sony Walkman at age 18 and loved to crank INXS to excess.

But now, at 46, I suffer from tinnitus — a buzzing noise I hear 24/7.



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I also have difficulty focusing on conversation in environments with a lot of background noise. Both are warning signs I have some hearing damage. Even worse, it turns out my favourite fitness activities have the potential to hasten my journey into a silent world. I have 20 years to go before I'm a senior citizen. So what's going on?

The Canadian Academy of Audiology defines tinnitus as "the term used for noises or sounds that are heard in one or both ears that do not come from an external source. They are often described as a high-pitched ringing, but can also be described as a buzzing, hissing, pulsing, whistling, roaring, or various other sounds." As many as 360,000 Canadians suffer from tinnitus. Noise exposure is its leading cause, and the Canadian Hearing Society says that hearing loss is occurring at an increasingly younger age.

Remember as a child trying to hear the ocean by holding a seashell to your ear? That's what tinnitus sounds like to me, only at a higher pitch, like a cricket. It rings louder at night when everything else is quiet. I'm lucky my personal buzz isn't that loud; some people suffer from tinnitus so debilitating it leads to increased stress and, in some cases, depression.

I also have difficulty deciphering specific words when there is competing noise, such as a kitchen faucet. Before realizing I had symptoms of hearing loss, my husband would accuse me of not listening, whereas to me, it seemed he mumbled. How ironic that my teenagers have to ask me to turn down the TV and stereo!

Two things can cause noise-induced hearing loss (NIHL): actual sound level, measured in decibels (dBA), and length of exposure to high dBA. The louder the sound, the less time it takes for that noise to damage your hearing. According to Health Canada, if sound levels exceed 95 dBA, there is "a significant risk of permanent hearing loss if you are

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exposed for 45 minutes or more per day." At more than 105 dBA, significant risk happens when "you are exposed for just five minutes per day."

NIHL progresses gradually over time and is painless and permanent. By the time you notice symptoms, it is too late to prevent it.

M.J. DeSousa, a Toronto audiologist, compares the effects of cumulative noise damage to walking on grass. The first few times, the impressions left by your footprints

bounce back easily. But eventually, the impressions become permanent and the grass is damaged. Similarly, the little hair cells in your inner ear can withstand some abuse, but over time, they can't recover and hearing loss results.

DeSousa, 41, suffers from mild tinnitus herself. A busy mom, she can't believe how high noise levels are at her kids' recreational events, such as swim meets where even competitors sometimes miss the sound of the starter's horn. She helped out as a timer at one event and her own ears were ringing afterwards from too much exposure.

Canadian regulations for workplace safety require employers to provide hearing protection for employees where the noise level exceeds 85 dBA (90 dBA in Quebec). But there are no regulations for recreational noise levels. In these cases, you have to be your own sound level control board, managing both your exposure and duration.

I've been an avid fitness fanatic for 20 years, participating in everything from aerobics to Spinning and even the new Latin dance fitness craze called Zumba. The sound level in these classes can be deafening...literally, as it turns out. Exposure for an hour, three or four times a week, on a regular basis can add up to significant cumulative damage.

I measured the sound levels in my classes to find out how loud they really are. In the Spinning class, the sound level ranged between 88 and 95 dBA, and shot up to 98 when the instructor hollered some motivation for the last few hill climbs. Zumba measured up to 98 dBA at the back of the room, away from the speakers. A friend came over to talk to me after Zumba finished, and although I was only three feet from her, she was shouting at me as if I were across the room.

Margaret Cheesman, principal investigator at the National Centre for Audiology at the University of Western Ontario

HOW LOUD CAN YOU GO

dBA	SOUND SOURCE
140	airplane takeoff
110	chainsaw, rock concert
110	MP3 player on max
93	music in fitness class
88	crowded restaurant
60	normal conversation

THRESHOLD OF PAIN

130-140 dBA



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in London, says people in the 40-plus age group are experiencing fairly high rates of hearing loss, and thinks that a good deal of it is preventable. (In her opinion, sound levels beyond 90 are unnecessary for a fitness class.) A 2001 Canadian Hearing Society survey found that hearing loss affects almost a quarter of people between the ages of 40 and 60. Furthermore, 70 per cent of those who claimed to have hearing loss were under 60, with an average age of 51.

Frustrated with my own symptoms, I consulted a certified otolaryngologist, who scheduled an audiology test as well as a precautionary MRI to check for internal structural causes.

Surprisingly, the audiology results showed that my hearing is still within an acceptable range. The doctor found that my tinnitus and focus issues are likely symptoms of NIHL, stating that I will “just have to learn to live with them.” He suggested I try tinnitus-retraining therapy, which takes almost two years to complete and involves listening to audiotapes of varying sound levels and re-training your brain to ignore the phantom tinnitus sounds. If the ringing gets worse, I will consider this.

In the meantime, I take DeSousa’s “daily dose” advice to heart. “We need to think about how much noise we’re exposed to in a day from all potential sources,” she advises. “For example, if you blow-dry your hair, then hop on the subway with your iPod turned up, then go to a fitness class later, you may be overdoing noise exposure.”

Cheesman says we need to take responsibility for proper sound levels in our own environments. She likes to see people actually ask to have the sound turned down, and “not make the assumption that we’re the only ones finding it too loud.” She requests this in her own fitness classes and at the movies, “particularly at the beginning when they are running the trailers, which are louder than the movie itself.” She doesn’t mind being the one to ask; she sees lots of others plugging their ears with their fingers.

Cheap foam earplugs available at drugstores are effective if inserted properly. My earplugs reduce sound by 33 dBA, bringing my fitness class exposure down to a level in the sixties, a safe number for any duration of time. Besides, I can still hear every instruction from the drill sergeant at the front.

The best I can do now is protect the hearing I still have. I don’t care if I look dorky at the gym. I don’t want my tinnitus to get worse; when I’m 65, I want to be able to hear gentle breezes and the laughter of a grandchild. **M**

STEPS TO HEALTHY HEARING

GET YOUR HEARING TESTED See a doctor if you have persistent ringing in your ears or sudden hearing loss.

PRACTISE SAFE LISTENING Keep earplugs in your purse or gym bag. Try noise-reducing headphones, and set a volume limit for personal stereos when in a quiet room.

REST If you have a ringing sensation or a muffled feeling after exposure to noise, this means your ears have been overloaded and need some quiet time to recover.

ADVOCATE It’s up to you to ask for the volume to be turned down. If you have to shout into someone’s ear to be heard when you are standing right beside her, the sound level is too high.