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Loud music damages hearing sensitivity over time

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By **JIM McGUINNESS**
 Feature writer

David Sizemore is happy that his 16-year-old son, Ian, shares his passion for music. But there's an unfortunate side effect the elder Sizemore hopes Ian doesn't inherit: Hearing loss.

The Kingsport resident suffers from moderate high-frequency loss in his left ear, less in his right ear and tinnitus, or ringing, in both ears, which he attributes to too many concerts back in the mid-'70s and early '80s.

"It did gradual damage as time went on," Sizemore said. "I knew something was gone. I would put a pocket watch up to my right ear and hear the ticking just fine. Then I'd put it to my left ear, and I couldn't hear it."

As a result, Sizemore insists that Ian wear hearing protection while playing guitar in Speak of the End, a Christian metal hardcore band. He recently bought two pairs of Etymotic Research ER-20 High Fidelity earplugs - a pair for Ian and one for himself. While not as effective as a custom-fit set of musician earplugs, they provide a 20 decibel reduction in noise with a wide frequency response.

All five Speak of the End members wear some form of hearing protection. Ian has been wearing the Etymotic brand earplugs for two months.

"I like them because it reduces what you hear but it doesn't reduce the quality," Ian said. "You can still hear everything. It's just not as loud."

Hearing experts think more people of all ages should consider such precautions. According to the Better Hearing Institute, about 31 million Americans suffer from hearing loss, including 65 percent younger than retirement age.

Excessive noise is the main cause of hearing loss. And while there are numerous ways in which people are exposed to loud sounds, the trend in the music world seems to suggest that louder is better.

Experts agree that continued exposure to noise of 85 decibels or louder, over time, will eventually harm hearing. A typical rock concert can be between 110 and 140 decibels.

"I was at a show in Nashville recently," said Speak of the End singer Luke Arnold. "When the drummer hit the kick drum, it was so loud, I thought I was gonna have a heart attack."

Kingsport audiologist Heather Light has noticed the movement toward listening to music louder.

"With the new technology and improved fidelity, the better systems and the digital systems, everybody's trying to get the best sound," Light said. "It just keeps getting louder and louder."

The newest assault on our hearing comes in the form of the iPod. While iPods typically come with an ear bud that sits in the bowl of the ear, some people are seeking specialized ear pieces that deliver the sound directly to the eardrum. Light says such devices make the music louder, causing more hearing loss.

"An iPod can go 110 decibels," Light said. "That's huge. It's like a rock concert or an airplane. It's



David Sizemore (middle) insists that the members of his son's band, Speak of the End, wear hearing protection when they perform. The band members are Ryan Devens (left), Ben Ramirez, Luke Arnold, Daniel Taylor and Ian Sizemore.



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The Quinnipiac University poll, which comes at a time of heightened political debate over how to deal with an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the country, found that 88 percent of U.S. voters believe illegal immigration is a "very serious" or "somewhat serious" problem. Other poll findings for U.S. voters include: 62 percent oppose making it easier for illegal immigrants to become citizens and 50 percent oppose eliminating automatic U.S. citizenship for the children born in the United States whose parents are illegal immigrants. If you had been contacted to vote in this poll would your opinion match the reported outcome?

No.
 Yes.

Results

loud."

While loud rock music can potentially harm your ears, music-induced hearing loss is not restricted to a particular style of music. As technology and fidelity have improved, people in general are listening to music louder than before, regardless of genre.

"I was just listening to the new James Blunt CD," said Kingsport resident Brad Tester, bassist for rock band Pale Orchid. "He's an acoustic singer-songwriter. It's soft music, but I had it cranked up loud. I guess it's just human nature to listen to music at very loud volumes.

It's also human nature for many musicians to play loud. Tester, who is 33, has played in his share of loud bands during the past 15 years.

"I still play loud music," Tester said. "In our practice room, the sound level gets really high. Our drummer always wears earplugs. When he's sitting down, he's got the guitar amp and the bass amp shooting right at his head."

Yet Tester himself seldom wears earplugs, despite diminished hearing that he says dates back to his mid-20s. "I've used earplugs on and off over the years, but especially playing out live, I prefer not to use them," Tester said. "We even have a whole set of earplugs. Sometimes when I leave practice, I say, 'Why did I not put earplugs in?' You go through a couple hours of practicing at high volume, and sometimes your ears will be ringing."

While Speak of the End goes full-throttle with the volume at shows, they have toned things down at practice per the suggestion of David Sizemore. "They aren't playing in front of anyone when they practice," said Sizemore, the group's manager. "So it doesn't make sense to turn it up so loud."

A problem for many musicians is hearing themselves on stage. With the advent of public address systems, individual musicians and vocalists often turn their own levels up so they can hear themselves over the din of the other instruments.

Many musicians have approached the problem by going to in-ear monitors.

"It's kind of the same as some of the iPod stories that have come out lately," said Dave Richard, guitarist for Bristol-based band Gretchen. "Little ear pieces that can go to a volume that can, over a period of time, take its toll on you."

Richards, 35, has played in bands for 15 years. He had his hearing checked by an audiologist just last year. "I was OK," he said. "No hearing loss at all."

Gretchen uses a specially designed in-ear system in which each musician has been fitted with a custom-built ear piece. Each player also has his own volume control. "We're protected because we no longer have to use loud volume on stage to be able to hear ourselves," Richards said. "As musicians, we're in control ultimately of how loud it goes."

Such systems make it possible for musicians to travel with less equipment, or rely on the sometimes unknown quality of club sound systems.

"This is all part of the problem," Richards said. "We used to travel with a set of monitors because clubs didn't have monitors, and you never knew what to expect as far as the quality. You can have a poor quality monitor system that can damage your ears just because the sound is not balanced. If you've got a really good system with balanced sound, it'll be better for your ears across the board, and you won't have to go so loud to hear what you need."

Helping musicians maintain their hearing is a goal of Kathy Peck. A longtime musician in the San Francisco Bay area, Peck suffered hearing damage in 1984 while playing a set at the Oakland Coliseum as a member of the Contractions.

In 1988, Peck co-founded Hearing Education and Awareness for Rockers (H.E.A.R.), a nonprofit hearing information source for musicians and music lovers. The group partners with audiologists and ear doctors along with musicians and clubs to promote hearing safety. Celebrity endorsers such as Pete Townshend of The Who, Lars Ulrich of Metallica, Les Claypool of Primus and Pat Benatar have assisted in H.E.A.R. outreach campaigns.

"We promote hearing protection and high-fidelity earplugs," Peck said. "Not everybody can afford that, but it's what a lot of professional musicians use, along with bartenders and club staff."

The group assists in providing hearing protection for musicians and music patrons. In the past, they have outfitted clients such as the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra with earplugs. They have also worked with clubs on providing plugs for their customers.

In 2002, H.E.A.R. worked with Bay Area clubs to establish a "noise ordinance" where venues provide ear protection for patrons.

"We worked really long with the clubs to make it so they would promote harm reduction," Peck said.

While Richards hasn't noticed earplugs being made available in any Tri-Cities venues, he has seen

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them at four stops outside the area.

"At some of the bigger clubs where you can have 500 people and up, it's not uncommon that they'll have vats right there at the concession stand," Richards said. "We have also taken them to our own shows."

Light is an advocate of wearing earplugs. She also recommends using good judgment, whether listening to music in the car, on an iPod or at a concert.

"People need to watch their volume levels," Light said. "If they're at a loud concert, they should get towards the middle of the room and take a break. If you notice any itching in the ear or a buzzing, leave immediately."

How loud is too loud for a musician? Peck said it sometimes comes down to using common sense.

"If your audience is sitting outside the club because it's too loud, then you probably need to do something," Peck said.

For more information on music and hearing loss, visit the H.E.A.R. Web site at www.hear.net.

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