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Study: 30% increase in teens with hearing loss

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Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

Christopher "Jtro" Navarro, 18, of San Francisco listens to music on his iPod on Market Street. Portable music players don't appear to be the cause of the increase in hearing loss.

Nearly 1 in 5 American adolescents has some level of hearing loss, a rate that has climbed substantially over the past two decades, according to a study released Tuesday.

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The obvious culprit would be personal music players - anecdotally speaking, who hasn't seen a teenager blasting his iPod on BART? But doctors say the answer isn't that simple.

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The type of damage found by researchers conducting the study isn't usually associated with exposure to loud noises, although doctors aren't ruling out blaring music as a possible cause. Some audiologists say the causes may be related to an increase in certain genetic disorders, for example, or the fact that premature babies, who are often more susceptible to hearing loss as they get older, have better survival rates than ever before.

Whatever the reason, 30 percent more of today's teenagers have some level of hearing loss compared with their peers in the late '80s and early '90s, according to the study, which was published in the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#). One in 20 youths between the ages of 12 and 19 has enough damage that it may impact the ability to listen and learn.

"That's a huge jump in hearing loss," said Dr.

Lawrence Lustig, director of otology and neurotology

at UCSF. "You really need to start doing some much more intense testing on these kids" to determine what is causing it, he said.

If anything, the rate of children with hearing loss should be decreasing, said Lustig and other researchers, because in general people are much more aware of the effects of loud noises on hearing, and presumably they're taking steps to protect themselves.

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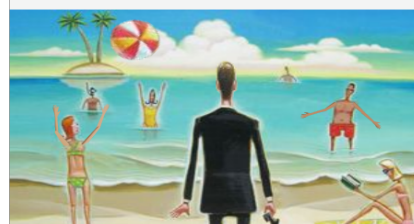
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Additional screening

At the very least, doctors said, it might be prudent to do more regular screening of teenagers to check for hearing problems. All newborns in [California](#) have their hearing tested, and most children get another screening in elementary school, but after that, it is up to teenagers to report when they're having trouble hearing, or parents, teachers or doctors to realize something is wrong.

The study, which was done by researchers at [Brigham and Women's Hospital](#) in Boston, looked at nearly 5,000 adolescents ages 12 to 19 who had their hearing screened as part of the National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys, which are large federal health databases. One group of kids was screened from 1988 to 1994, and the second group from 2005 to 2006. The researchers then compared results.

Of the children who had hearing loss, most experienced a "slight" loss - meaning they may not be able to hear certain consonants or very soft sounds. But 5.3 percent of those tested were suffering mild hearing loss, which means they may be missing entire words when someone is speaking at a normal volume.

Parents might notice a problem when children don't respond to their name being called, or they have trouble following conversations in noisy rooms, doctors said. They may notice that a child's schoolwork is suffering.

Missing the lesson

Audiologists estimate that teachers may have one or two students in each class with a significant hearing loss. Classrooms are often noisy, chaotic environments and if hearing loss turns down the volume on the teacher's voice, some students may not be able to follow lectures or classroom discussions.

"If they're not hearing everything that's being said, they might not be able to fill in the blanks," said Dr. Jody Winzelberg, an audiologist and director of rehabilitation services at Packard Children's Hospital. "Classrooms do not have the best signal-to-noise ratio. A hearing loss is going to add to that difficulty to hear and learn."

Researchers in the study looked for audiogram patterns - the results of hearing tests - that have been associated with exposure to loud noises, and found that the rate of kids suffering from that type of hearing loss didn't change over time. The adolescents themselves also didn't report having more exposure to loud noises over time, although researchers noted that kids usually aren't the best judge of what's "loud," especially when it comes to music.

"I'm sure they do not readily recognize the symptoms of noise exposure - the ringing in their ears, or feeling like your hearing is deadened or numbed down," Winzelberg said. "We're really working on educating children as to the dangerous side effects of being exposed to noise."

But it's possible that the particular audiogram patterns associated with loud noise exposure are outdated, hearing experts said. And even if loud noises aren't a direct cause of the growing rates of hearing loss in children, it is still a good idea to protect young ears, doctors said.

Damage down the road

They also noted that hearing loss from noise exposure can take years or even decades to develop, which might mean that teenagers with normal hearing now may end up needing hearing aids in their 50s or 60s - instead of in their 70s or 80s like their grandparents.

But even if teenagers don't need to give up their [MP3 players](#), parents should talk to them about keeping the volume safe - if other people can hear the music coming from earbuds, it's probably too loud.

Hearing loss up; reasons aren't so loud and clear

Culprits behind auditory problems in teens aren't so obvious.

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"Even though this study doesn't tell us exactly what's causing hearing loss, all parents should talk to their kids about risk from long-term noise exposure," said Dr. Mai Thy Truong, a pediatric otolaryngologist at [Kaiser Permanente](#) Santa Clara. "That's pretty obvious. It might take time to develop. It may be we'll need to look at these kids in their 40s, 50s and 60s."

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