Loud music and ear ringing? [1]

(1) Dear Alice,

I went to a club one night and the music was really loud. I've been going to clubs for a while now and the loud music usually makes my ears ring, but the ringing usually disappears in the morning. Well, this time, the ringing has lasted for several days. Is this a problem I should be worried about?

(2) Dear Alice,

I have a question for you. I am a DJ and every Saturday I work in a disco. After doing this for some days, I can hear a noise in my ears (especially in the one where I wear the headphone). Is this dangerous? How may I help it?

— Frightened

Answer

Dear Reader and Frightened,

Good vibes, good music... but oh, that annoying ringing sound... ugh. The ringing you're both hearing may be a case of tinnitus, which affects one or both ears. The sound may come and go, or it may be continuous. Caused by a variety of factors, tinnitus may sometimes be a sign of hearing loss. Repeated exposure to loud noises, such as noisy clubs, typically over a long period of time may lead to permanent hearing loss and tinnitus. Given the fact that the ringing has lasted for several days (for both of you), it may be a good idea to get it checked out. A medical professional may be able to tell you more definitively what is causing the ringing in your ears and provide options for treatment.

About one in five people experience tinnitus, which may be caused by everything from certain medical conditions, some medications, and even wax buildup in the ears. One of the notable and preventable causes, however, is exposure to loud noise. While a specialist can diagnose what may be going on, here are some general tips to deal with tinnitus:

- Avoid exposure to loud sounds and noises.
• Wear hearing protectors (i.e., ear muffs and ear plugs when exposure to loud sounds is unavoidable).
• Improve circulation by being active daily.
• Check your blood pressure and talk to a health care provider if it’s high.
• Get enough quality sleep to ward off fatigue.
• Steer clear or reduce intake of alcohol, nicotine, and caffeine.
• Incorporate stress management strategies in your day-to-day.
• Try to ignore the ringing sound as much as you can (using a fan or white noise machine may help mask the sound).

What’s more, tinnitus most often occurs alongside hearing loss. Although one night of loud music may not result in immediate effects, temporary hearing loss can occur and make it harder to hear sounds in the future. Over time, jammin’ to high-volume tunes on the regular can damage sensory structures in the inner ear. These sensory structures, called hair cells, convert sounds into electrical signals sent to your brain, where the sounds are interpreted and identified. Hearing loss, and possibly tinnitus, occurs when loud sounds and noises, typically more than 85 decibels (dB), damage these hair cells. After that, they can no longer can conduct sound and new ones don’t grow back in their place.

Protecting your hearing doesn't necessarily mean staying out of the clubs forever, though. Earplugs or earmuffs can protect your ears against loud noises. Sure, it may not seem as cool to be wearing them, but at the end of the night (or... er, morning) your ability to hear may be better as compared to other club-goers. Frightened, a few additional questions for you to consider: Would it be possible for you to wear earplugs along with your headphones as a way to muffle the music from both the speakers and headset? Would cranking the volume down a couple of notches detract from the event? Could you use some pre-set playlists to reduce your need for cueing through your headphones? You both might also consider how to determine safe volume levels as well. For instance, if you have to shout over a noise even though you’re at arm's length from someone, it probably means that the noise could damage your hearing. If you need to guesstimate how loud 85 dB sounds like, here are some hints: a normal chat with a friend is estimated at 60 dB, whereas fireworks and motorcycles can clock in between 120 to 150 dB.

Lastly, discussing this matter with an ear specialist such as an otologist or otolaryngologist can help you with ideas about how to protect your ears or deal with the ringing. To learn more about tinnitus and hearing loss, check out the American Academy of Otolaryngology [2] for additional resources.

Hear’s to hearing the vibration,

Alice!

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