

Musicians and Tinnitus: Protect Your Hearing

By NEIL CHERIAN, M.D.

Tinnitus does not discriminate. Everyone is at risk for tinnitus whether or not they experience significant sound exposure. However, noise exposure is often a controllable risk factor. Professional musicians are in a difficult position since they rely on their ears for their livelihood, and they expose their ears to the rigors of their work. For many musicians, tinnitus can be considered a *repetitive strain injury*.

If you think it's too loud, it probably is!

We are often fooled by volume, whether quiet or loud. Our ears gauge and adapt to loudness by comparing different sound intensities. Factors such as fatigue, attention, sound quality, acoustics (sound reflection and absorption), background noise and alcohol consumption can affect our perception of a sound itself. Furthermore, as we lose hearing, our ear's ability to sense loudness diminishes. Its ability to protect itself can also change. In other words, by the time we notice a problem with our hearing, the damage may have already begun.

Prevention strategies

Fortunately, there are several common-sense strategies that everyone can use to reduce the likelihood of getting tinnitus and/or hearing loss. There are also active and passive strategies that the working musician should definitely consider.

First, independent of how much hearing loss you think you do or



Dr. Neil Cherman of the Cleveland Clinic and Liberty DeVitto, long-time drummer for Billy Joel and tinnitus sufferer.

don't have, and the severity of your tinnitus (none to severe), it is imperative that you get a baseline hearing test from an audiologist. Consider it as important as having your blood pressure or cholesterol checked. A regular hearing test can measure any noticeable change in hearing. A hearing test is especially important if your hearing changes suddenly.

Reducing the intensity and duration of sound exposure is the key to hearing protection. Whenever possible, take breaks from the music, particularly while practicing, listening to recorded music or working in the studio. This will help reduce both ear and general fatigue. Speaker choice and positioning in the studio or on stage can also affect your ability to hear clearly and at lower volumes.

Prevention products

Hearing protectors come in various shapes, colors, sizes, prices and effectiveness. You can spend anywhere from fifty cents for foam earplugs to \$150 for custom-molded musician's earplugs. Over the past ten years, in-the-ear monitors have become widely available. You can buy off-the-shelf versions for \$50 to \$100. Customized versions with ear molds range from \$300 to \$1,000, and are available from Future Sonics™, Sennheiser, Sensaphonics®, Shure®, Etymotic™, and Ultimate Ears®. Custom solutions, compared to off-the-shelf products, tend to provide better comfort, higher sound isolation and often better fidelity.

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Standing (l to r): Barbara Kennedy; David P. Fagerlie (CEO); Gary P. Reul, Ed.D.; Philip O. Morton; Jodi Klein; Michael J.A. Robb, M.D.

Seated (l to r): Richard Salvi, Ph.D.; Jim Patricola; J. Scott Simons; Margaret F. Peak, Ph.D.; Scott C. Mitchell, J.D., CPA. Knelling: Neil Cherian, M.D.

Not shown: David R. Anderson, J.D.; W.F.S (Sam) Hopmeier, BC-HIS.

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Though these products are designed with musicians in mind, sound engineers can also benefit from ear protection. Your local audiologist can answer your questions about which type of hearing protection is best for you.

But just like any device, these products do not guarantee a positive outcome. In fact, using them improperly may cause more damage to your hearing. Although they are marketed as hearing protection devices, you should still be clear about *how* they protect your hearing: these products reduce outside noise, thereby reducing the sound intensity in your ears. *However, using one doesn't mean you can disregard other safe-listening practices.*

Ensure your music career

Many people consider using hearing protection an unwelcome sign of aging or a sign of weakness. The excuses for not using ear protection range from "It's not cool" to "I forgot my earplugs." The end result of these excuses can be catastrophic. Be intelligent about your listening behaviors. Pay attention to the volume and duration of music you listen to or play. Be aware of your environment, and use a proven hearing protection strategy. This is practical knowledge that professional musicians need to ensure a safe and healthy career in music. Be a positive example to your audience and fans. ☺☺

Dr. Cherian is a practicing otoneurologist at the Cleveland Clinic and director of its newly launched Center for Performance Medicine. He is a member of ATA's Board of Directors.