



# Headphone Safety 101—This Is How to Save Your Hearing

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It's commonplace to use headphones on a commute, while exercising, or in the workplace to drown out distractions or zone out from the real world. We all do it! But you might be surprised to learn how easy it is to affect your hearing, safety and health when doing so. Don't stress yet—we got the skinny from ear health specialists on how to safely enjoy your tunes all summer long.

## **Follow the 60/60 rule.**

What is that, exactly? Play your music at no more than 60 percent of maximum volume for no more than 60 minutes a day, says Tahl Colen, an otolaryngologist in New York City. "Loud sounds have potential to cause permanent damage to your inner ears, resulting in potentially permanent hearing loss," he explains. "The important factors are the volume of the sound and the duration of exposure."

## **Never listen to music at 85 decibels (dB) or higher.**

A decibel is the unit used to measure a level of sound. How to know what volume is at what decibel? "Normal speech is approximately 60 dB and whispered sounds are 30, while ambulance sirens range from about 100 dB to 105 dB," says Suman Golla, associate professor of otolaryngology at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine in Pittsburgh. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) set guidelines stating that anyone exposed to sounds of 85 dB for eight hours or longer is legally required to be provided with and to wear protection, as this can put you at risk for hearing loss. At 100 dB, just 15 minutes can result in damage.

## **If other people can hear your headphones, turn the music down.**

Your personal audio device is just that: personal. If individuals standing around you can hear your music, it's too loud. "If you experience tinnitus or a ringing or buzzing in your ears after removing your device, or you experienced dulled hearing after pulling out your headphones, your music is too loud," says Colen.

Other signs you need to turn the tunes down? **If you raise your voice to be heard, if you can't hear someone standing three feet away, or if speech sounds muffled or dull after listening to music, says Michelle R. Yagoda, an otolaryngologist in New York City. "A decibel meter app may be helpful in determining the level of the music you're listening to."**

**Don't shove your earbuds in too far.**

If your buds aren't staying in, you're not fixing the problem by pushing them hard into your ears. Earbuds are designed to go a safe distance into the ear canal. While it's unlikely you'll be able to push them in further—unless maybe they're faulty—doing so can cause harm. "If you push the earbud too far, you can damage the skin of the ear canal and potentially be at risk to develop an outer ear infection," says Golla. "If pushed much further, you could potentially rupture the eardrum."

**Earbuds can be more dangerous than headphones.**

We're not saying that earbuds are dangerous in general, but because they're closer to your eardrum, you should be aware. "Earbuds can increase the sound intensity reaching your inner ear by as much as nine decibels when compared to over-the-ear headphones," says Colen. "Earbuds also filter out less outside noise than traditional over-the-ear headphones. Therefore, people have a tendency to increase volume more with earbuds to compete against external sounds, resulting in higher listening volumes and higher risk of long-term hearing damage."

**Clean your buds on the regular.**

For most healthy individuals, it's rare to get an ear infection from earbuds. Still, it's important to keep them from getting dirty. "They should be wiped down and cleaned at least once a week," says Yagoda. "And headphones should not be shared. If they must be—like on a plane or something—they should be sanitized, or a cover should be used."

**Be alert when you're using headphones.**

Whether you're walking to the train for a work commute or going for a jog in the park, it's important to still be in tune with your surroundings. "While listening to music, our other senses maybe dulled and muted," says Golla. "Thus we may not pick up on not only auditory clues but also visual and tactile clues that help us to remain safe." If you're exercising, think twice about noise-canceling buds. They're a great option to help keep the volume of music lower in general, but they also sometimes completely mute auditory cues, which are important for safety and guidance.