

Rocking out on your workout poses hearing loss risk

Loud music, exercising at the gym don't mix, researcher finds

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Peter Watson enters the YMCA gym, cranks the rock 'n' roll on his iPod as loud as it'll go, and starts tearing up the treadmill.

It's the beginning of an hour-and-a-half workout that keeps his body in great shape -- but may be doing the opposite for his eardrums.

"It's for the beat, just to get me into the rhythm of what I'm doing," the 50-year-old says of his blaring headphones. "I don't like the ambient noise. I prefer to listen to music."

While University of Alberta researcher Bill Hodgetts doesn't mind a little workout music, he worries that -- between the noisy environment and the stress of exercise -- many gym-goers are listening loud and long enough to suffer permanent hearing damage.

"Noise basically conditions everyone ... to listen at a louder level," explains Hodgetts. "When you add exercise, people get even louder."

Those were among the findings of a study that Hodgetts, and his colleagues from the university's Speech Pathology and Audiology department, published in December.

With 24 male and female participants, Hodgetts set out to discover how loud they would set their iPods under a variety of conditions.

Subjects were placed on a stationary bike, then asked to adjust Stardust's *The Music Sounds Better With You* to their liking -- while sitting quietly, while sitting with recorded gym sounds being played, and while pedalling with gym sounds in the background.

Volume levels jumped to dangerous levels once background noise was introduced, and climbed even further during exercise.

"Pretty much everybody that was exercising ran a risk of (hearing) damage," said Hodgetts. But most wouldn't have known -- asked to gauge what volume they'd been at, all but four participants underestimated it by up to 50 per cent.

Fortunately, he says, the problem's easy to solve.

"We know that background noise is the biggest culprit, and we know there's a pretty easy solution for it: get a better set of headphones, that seal the ear canal and reduce the amount of background noise that's let in."