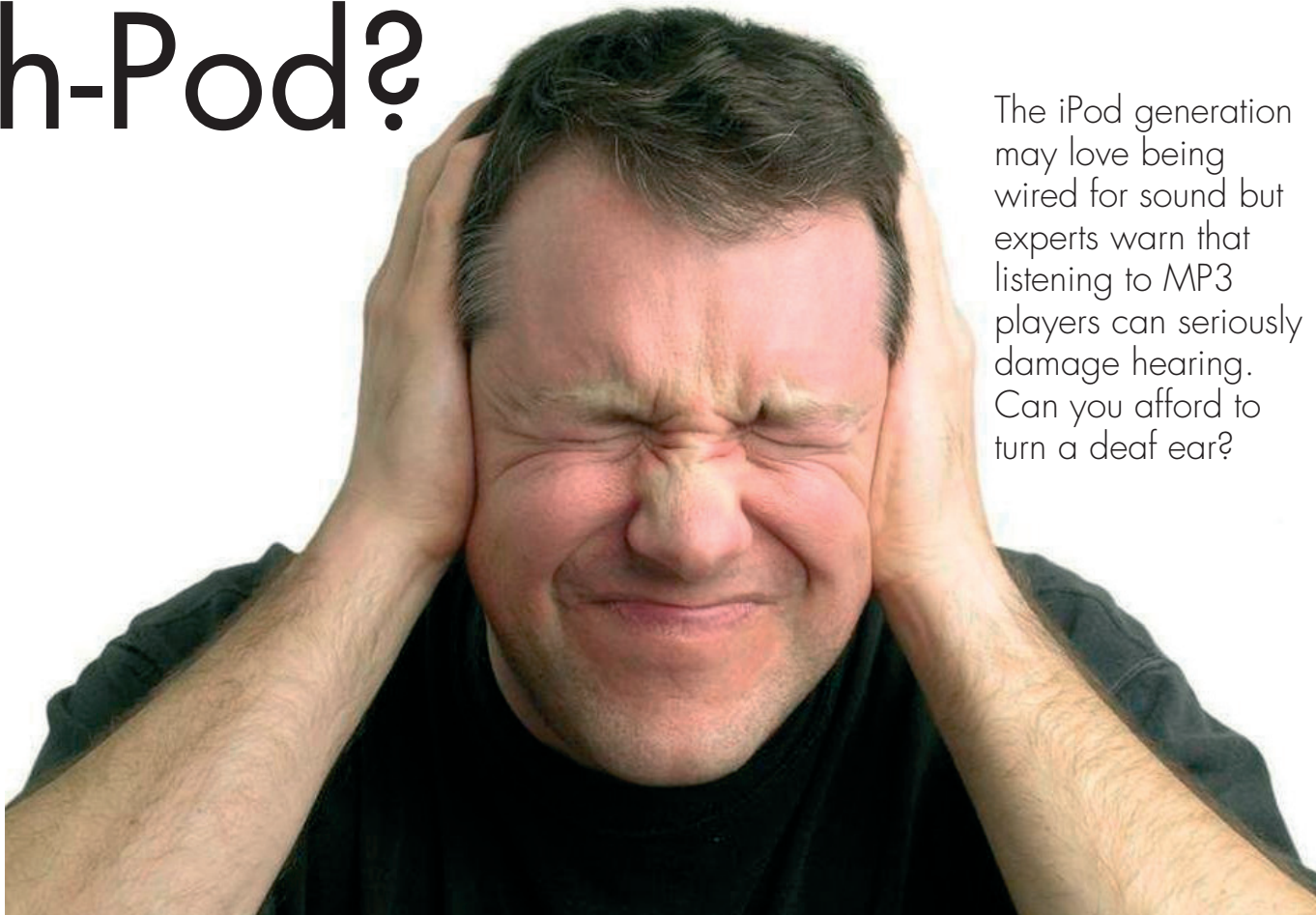


Eh-Pod?



The iPod generation may love being wired for sound but experts warn that listening to MP3 players can seriously damage hearing. Can you afford to turn a deaf ear?

Travelling around without a soundtrack might be unthinkable for anyone under the age of 40 but that music may be serenading a generation towards hearing problems.

Personal music players - iPods and other MP3 headsets - ranked amongst the top-selling Christmas gifts this year but experts fear few users are aware of the risks of noise damage to their ears.

New technology and ever-increasing storage capacity enables people to listen non-stop for hours - and at louder volumes than ever before - which could eventually impair hearing.

An estimated four million adolescents may be at risk of hearing damage from exposure to over-amplified music, according to the Institute of Hearing Research.

A separate survey by David Ormerod Hearing Centres found that one in seven people in the UK has hearing loss.

Dr John Low, chief executive of RNID, whose new website (www.dontlosethemusic.com) warns MP3 users about the problem says: "If young people don't heed our warnings about safer listening, they could end up facing premature hearing damage.

"If you are regularly plugged in, it's only too easy to clock up noise doses that could damage hearing

forever."

He points out that listening to an MP3 player at top volume - around 100 decibels - compares with the shattering noise level experienced by standing 10 feet from a pneumatic drill, and subjects ears to noise above the danger level.

Veteran rocker Jeff Rich - former drummer for Status Quo - is one of the musicians urging youngsters, including his own 22-year-old son, to heed the warnings.

Jeff, 53, says: "When we were performing we used to have a wall of giant amplifiers on either side of us on the stage - and I was stuck in the middle."

After a hearing test a few years ago he found he had only 50% hearing in his left ear and 30% in his right.

"I was worried I might end up permanently deaf but luckily hearing aids have transformed my life." He now wears Phonak Savia aids.

"Youngsters don't realise how much they are assaulting their ears by going to gigs and clubbing and constantly listening to music at top volume on personal players."

Jeff, who now runs his own business giving drumming masterclasses in schools, says: "Even my own son, Marc, who knows what I've gone through and is a musician, has not yet organised ear protection for when he's playing at gigs nor got proper safe

headphones for his MP3 player. Youngsters think, as I used to, that hearing problems will never happen to them."

WHAT CAUSES DAMAGE

Karen Shepherd, audiological services manager at David Ormerod Hearing Centres, says: "Tinnitus and noise-induced hearing loss occurs when the delicate hair nerve cells that line the inner ear suffer repeated trauma from loud sound vibrations.

She says there is a growing trend for younger people to visit centres and raise hearing concerns. Statistics show that 39% of 18 to 24-year-olds listen to personal stereos for more than an hour each day and 42% admit they believe they have the volume too high.

"We advise people to listen to portable players for 20 minutes at a time and then to have a break, and be aware that if the noise is audible to a person sitting next to them it's too loud for safety.

"In general, they should not go above the half-way level on the volume control. The problem is young people may be aware of risks to their sight but cannot so easily imagine deafness and ignore the risks. Also because music is enjoyable youngsters are more willing to tolerate noise levels which are potentially harmful."

WARNING SIGNS

Andrew Reid, from the British

Society of Audiology, says the first warning signs of hearing problems are a ringing or buzzing in the ears. "If people experience that they really need to turn down the player straight away and then consult their doctor if the problems persist."

Two American studies recently suggested that the design of in-ear headphones (which may ineffectively screen out background noise but come as standard with many portable music players), causes users to crank music up to damaging levels.

SOUNDS SENSE

Take regular breaks from your headphones to give your ears a rest. Turn the volume down a notch - even a small reduction in volume can make a big difference.

Avoid using the volume to drown out background noise. Check out additions to in-ear headphones that can block out this noise and allow player volume to be turned down.

If your MP3 player has a 'smart volume' feature, then use it once you've set the volume of your player for comfortable listening. If you can't hear someone talking at normal volume over the music, you're listening too loudly.

If you feel your hearing is getting dulled or you start to hear noises in your head, take a break from what you're doing and give your ears a rest.