

## **Wearing Personal Stereo Headphones While at Work Safety Implications**



- Already banned in lab areas within BCDD.
- GRE are querying what aspect of wearing headphones constitutes a health and safety risk and asking for a risk assessment to be carried out.
- Four risk factors:
  1. Noise induced hearing loss;
  2. Inability to hear alarms, verbal warnings, people approaching, etc;
  3. Distraction/reduction in concentration;
  4. Breakdown in communication between workers/isolation.
- Attached are a selection of articles currently available on the www relating to the above.
- We need to have our own policy & guidance on this.
- Any comments?



Safety Advisory Services

## UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

### POLICY ON USE OF HEADPHONES WHILE WORKING

While some staff and students might like to listen to music wearing headphones for recreational purposes, this has health and safety implications in a work situation. This is irrespective of whether the headphones are connected directly to a portable/personal music system or operate via a radio link.

The main issue is that staff/students may not be particularly aware of any immediate hazards in their working area either arising from their own work or that of colleagues. The concern is that even if warnings were given verbally in the event of any incident they may be unable to respond because the volume of the music system would prevent such warnings being heard.

This concern is not confined to higher risk environments such as laboratories but also extends to offices and to other areas such as computer clusters. There are two concerns here, which also apply in the higher risk areas.

The first is that if the fire alarm system was to operate someone wearing headphones may either not hear the alarm or may take some time before realising that an alarm was operating. This then has implications for their safe evacuation from the building.

Secondly, headphone wearers may not be aware of others coming into their area and therefore may not be immediately aware of intruders who may pose a risk to their personal safety.

Because of this, the University Health and Safety Committee advise that Heads of Schools should not permit staff and students to use headphones for recreational purposes because it might jeopardise their personal safety.

It is recognised that there are however a range of activities where staff and students are required to use headphones as part of their work/study. In these cases Heads are advised to consult with the Safety Advisory Services to ensure that there are other appropriate measures in place to ensure the safety of such personnel.

## Audio devices - Safety Guideline

### Use of ear-plug/headphone audio devices in the workplace (Digital Media Players iPods, MP3 Players, Walkmans, etc.)

#### 1. General

The University of Queensland recognises that many staff and students own and use audio devices with ear-plugs/headphones.

This guideline aims to ensure the use of these devices does not impact on the health and safety of users and others at the University of Queensland.

#### 2. Implementation of guideline

The following points shall be implemented by all University staff to minimise the impact of ear-plug/headphone audio devices:

- The health and safety of the wearer and others must not be compromised by the use of these devices. If the wearer's situational awareness is reduced to the extent they cannot hear alarms, calls for help and so on, these devices must not be used.
- Staff and students should consider using a single ear piece and mono sound whenever possible, as this will help maintain awareness of what is happening around them.
- Staff and students must be made aware of the risk of permanent noise-induced hearing loss that results from exposure to excessive noise, including using high volume settings on their audio device. If someone standing nearby can hear what the ear-plug/headphone wearer is listening to, the volume is too loud.
- Devices that fit inside the ear – earphones, ear-plugs, ear buds, etc – have the potential to transfer harmful substances to the ear canal. When working in a biochemical laboratory where potentially infectious or toxic substances are in use, wearers must complete a specific risk assessment (see below) and should consider using a headphone that sits flat outside the ear, rather than an earpiece. Earplugs/headphones must not be repeatedly touched, adjusted or re-fitted to the ear, as there is a risk of contamination from biological/chemical substances.
- Devices that fit inside the ear – earphones, ear-plugs, ear buds, etc – must not be worn under ear muffs.
- A specific Risk Assessment is required prior to the use of any ear-plug/headphone in a **Laboratory** or **Workshop** where:
  - Moving machinery is operated, e.g. centrifuges, lathes, drills, etc, to ensure the risk of entanglement is not increased.
  - Infectious organisms are present, e.g. PC2 or PC3 laboratories.
  - Toxic/carcinogenic substances are present.
  - Reduced situational awareness is considered too dangerous.
- Specific approval should be obtained from area managers, supervisors, etc, prior to the use of any ear-plug/headphone device in the workplace.

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## Do You Have a Policy on the Use of MP3 Players?

1 09 2009

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The [National Transportation Safety Administration](#) estimates that at least 25% of all automobile accidents are caused by distracted drivers. Research has already proven that listening to music through earbuds or headphones while driving is a distraction and becoming a leading cause of vehicle incidents. It is, in fact, now illegal to use earbuds or headphones in the states of California and New York while operating a motor vehicle.

In Australia similar research, by insurance companies, notes the same findings. A spokesman for [NRMA Insurance](#), John Hallal, stated that “Drivers should always be alert to what is happening around them, and by using headphones, the driver is likely to be less aware of the surrounding traffic conditions. Headphones can totally block out other sounds. You won’t hear a siren, you won’t hear a horn – and that can be dangerous.”

So is there a good solution? Auto makers are increasingly offering jacks to support MP3 players in their vehicles. Some have more integrated systems that allow iPod or MP3 playlists to be displayed on the dashboard and operated through buttons mounted on the steering wheel. The problem is, not all people are buying new vehicles in a time of recession and don’t have the option for plugging their iPod or MP3 player into their vehicle. Furthermore, drivers are still tempted to change songs on the console or MP3 player and turn their music louder; again a possible distraction while operating a motor vehicle. Driving with earbuds or headphones is considered a potential distraction/hazard and can lead to motor vehicle accidents under certain conditions.

Operators of any motor vehicle should be able to hear traffic and be aware of any driving hazards around them. This means that any distractions while driving should be eliminated to include using earbuds or headphones. For the safety of yourself, your family and others sharing the road, your attention must be dedicated to driving the car.

Another question that arises is whether or not it’s safe to use MP3 players in the workplace. Increasingly, workers are wearing earbuds or headphones to block out background noise and distractions around them. Some workers find it helps reduce stress and boredom which could lead to greater productivity and worker morale. But is it safe?

Wearing an MP3 player could be a potential hazard in situations where the cord could be caught in a piece of machinery. Often workers with long hair are required to tie back their hair for the same reason. An MP3 player could also influence the path taken by electricity in the same manner as wearing metal jewellery.

The safe use of MP3 players can be managed by setting a clear policy. Although completely banning the use of MP3 players may remove the risk to injury, for tasks that are repetitive or monotonous it can keep a worker stimulated and more productive.

In conclusion, Employers need to assess the injury risk to reward potential that MP3 players pose for a specific setting or activity. There is no blanket answer that can be applied and safety is also not the only issue, communication breakdowns among workers can develop and theft of proprietary information are just two other considerations.

[Pamela Cowan](#)



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## iPod Safety: Preventing Hearing Loss in Teens

By Alice Park

If you're one of the 173 million iPod users out there, you're probably reading this with your earbuds in.

Take them out. Even if only for a few minutes while you read this article.

Trust us, your hearing will thank you for it. While many music lovers are aware that **listening to iPods and MP3 players at high volumes can lead to hearing loss**, not many of them — especially not teens — do anything about it. In fact, when teens are pressured by friends or family to turn down the volume on their iPods, they do exactly what you'd expect them to do: they turn the volume up instead. Even teens who express concern about the risk of hearing loss listen to music at potentially dangerous levels — higher on average than kids who say they're not worried about deafness. ([See the top 10 iPhone applications.](#))

Go figure. But that's what researchers at Colorado University and Children's Hospital in Boston found in a small study of 30 young iPod users. Led by Cory Portnuff, an audiologist at Colorado who began studying iPod-related hearing loss in 2006, the study found that teens not only tend to play music louder than adults, but they are often unaware of how loud they're playing it. "I honestly don't believe that most people understand they are putting themselves at risk, or at what level of risk," says Portnuff. ([See pictures of a diverse group of American teens.](#))

Portnuff has documented that **listening to earbuds, or in-ear headphones, for 90 minutes a day at 80% volume is probably safe for long-term hearing** — a useful cutoff point to keep in mind. (But softer is better: you can safely tune in at 70% volume for about 4½ hours a day.) The risk of permanent hearing loss, Portnuff says, can increase with just five minutes of exposure a day to music at full volume. Over time, the noise can damage the delicate hair cells in the inner ear that transform sound waves to the electrical signals that the brain understands as sound.

So why would anyone ever listen to an iPod at maximum volume? Again, it's a simple misunderstanding of risk. Portnuff speculates that teens who say they worry about hearing loss but still listen to their iPods at high volumes probably assume that the manufacturer's maximum default setting is safe, or that turning the volume down to anything but full-blast is harmless. ([Read "The Year in Medicine 2008: From A to Z."](#))

Add to these misconceptions the fact that people are listening to music for longer periods of time — today's long-lasting batteries can crank out music for 15 hours or more — and it's no wonder that the **risk of hearing loss is increasing**. But perhaps so is the concern. In 2006 a Louisiana man filed suit against Apple, claiming that iPods are "not sufficiently adorned with adequate warnings regarding the likelihood of hearing loss." Soon after, health authorities in France demanded increased safety measures. So the company, based in Cupertino, Calif., revised its software to set the maximum volume at 100 dB (the equivalent of standing next to a pneumatic drill) for devices sold in Europe. Portnuff says certain devices sold in the U.S. can reach beyond 100 dB, however; some have recorded levels as high as 115 dB, similar to a chainsaw or rock concert.

Portnuff acknowledges that most iPod and MP3 users don't keep their devices at maximum volume — only about 7% to 24% listen at risky levels. But because most of us can, and are, spending more time listening to music through headphones, there is a real risk of hearing loss for anyone who plugs in. "It's a matter of how high you listen and for how long," he says. Listen for too high and too long, and you may have to replace those headphones with hearing aids in the not-too-distant future.

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