

Attitudes toward noise and risk behaviors in young adults

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Several studies have reported an increasing trend of noise-induced hearing loss among children and adolescents (Niskar et al, 2001, Blair et al., 1996). Exposure to loud music, especially among young people, is an important source of concern. Concert- and discotheque-goers are routinely exposed to sound levels above 100 dBA (Clark, 1991), which may cause temporary or permanent damage to the human ear and symptoms such as tinnitus (Kroener-Herwig et al., 2000).

A comparative study was completed between young adults in Sweden and in USA (Widén, Holmes & Erlandsson, 2006). Questionnaires were given to 382 young adults attending a community college in the USA and a comparative post-secondary institution in Sweden. The students were asked questions regarding their attitudes toward noise in general and loud music, their perceived hearing abilities, tinnitus or ringing in the ears and their use of hearing protection. The young adults in the US sample had in general more positive attitudes towards noise or loud music than the Swedish sample. The US subjects reported a significantly lower use of hearing protection than their Swedish peers when attending concerts and discotheques. Young women viewed, in general, noise in significantly more negative terms than the men did. The American males were most positive whereas the Swedish females were the most negative towards noise (Figure 1). These differences may be cultural or could be due to differences in the two countries' noise awareness in general.

In a previous study on Swedish adolescents, we found that the experience of hearing disturbances (e.g. pain and tinnitus) and concern about developing hearing loss correlate with concert- and discotheque-goers' use of hearing protection (Olsen-Widén & Erlandsson, 2004). Therefore, we would like to draw the attention to the association between risk behavior regarding exposure to loud music and risk behavior in a more traditional sense, e.g. smoking, drug abuse etc.

Even when the young adults in the current study reported hearing discomfort and tinnitus or ringing after exposure to loud levels at concerts and/or discotheques, many subjects from both countries did not report using ear protection. In order to prevent young people from developing noise-induced hearing loss more research on the effects of attitudes, norms and behavior and in what way these aspects can explain hearing damage is needed. In addition, this study highlights the need for educational programs to instill the importance of protecting hearing in adolescents and young adults.

Figure 1

