



Media brief on #safelistening



Make Listening Safe

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Make Listening Safe

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Acknowledgements

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1. Background

More than 5% of the global population lives with hearing loss. Due to a combination of current lifestyles and a lack of awareness about the dangers of listening to loud sounds, that percentage is likely to increase in the coming years.

Exposure to loud sounds may occur in occupational, environmental or recreational settings. This media brief focusses on the risk to hearing posed by listening to high volume sounds for prolonged periods in recreational settings.

To address the growing risk of hearing loss due to unsafe listening in recreational settings, WHO set up its [Make Listening Safe](#) initiative. A key aspect of this initiative is raising public awareness about the risks of listening to loud sounds and improving knowledge about safe listening practices. The aim is to improve listening behaviours at all ages, especially among adolescents and young adults, and to protect their hearing.

Traditional and social media can play a crucial and positive role in making listening safer.

2. Hearing loss: key facts

Hearing loss is a largely hidden condition and public awareness and acceptance of it remain limited. Yet, it is a subject of growing public health importance that impacts substantially people's health and well-being.

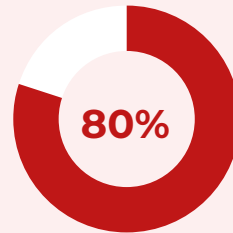
Over 5% (430 million)

of the world's population has hearing loss that affects their quality of life. The majority of these people live in low- and middle-income countries.

It is estimated that by 2050 this number could increase by **over 50%** to **700 million**.



These numbers refer to people with hearing loss greater than 35 decibels (dB) in their better hearing ear, meaning that only sounds louder than 35 dB can be heard (35 dB is approximately the sound level of a loud whisper close to the listener. "Normal" hearing has a threshold of 20 dB). Hearing loss at the 35 dB level is commonly termed "disabling hearing loss". Some common terms used when referring to people with hearing loss are summarized in section 7.



Of those with hearing loss, **80%** live in low- and middle-income countries where services required for their care are commonly lacking.



Hearing loss has far-reaching social and economic repercussions. Unaddressed hearing loss results in an annual global cost of **980 billion** dollars. (Further information on the global costs hearing loss can be found [here](#).)

Common causes of hearing loss include

genetic conditions, complications at birth, certain infectious diseases, chronic ear infections, exposure to loud sounds or noise, use of certain medicines, and age-related changes. (Further information on these causes can be found [here](#).)



Many causes of hearing loss, including noise-induced hearing loss, are **avoidable**. Among children (aged 0–14 years), as much as **60%** of hearing loss is attributed to preventable causes. (Further information on childhood hearing loss and ways to prevent and address it can be found [here](#).)



Hearing loss due to loud sounds or noise – also termed **“noise-induced hearing loss”** – initially typically effects the perception of high-pitched sounds, leading to difficulties in speech discrimination. People with this type of hearing loss often they feel they “can hear the sounds, but not understand what is being said”. Noise-induced hearing loss is mostly irreversible.



Many people develop hearing loss caused by prolonged exposure to loud sounds. Such exposure may occur in occupational, environmental or recreational settings. **Loud sounds damage ears and can lead to persistent tinnitus¹ and hearing loss.**

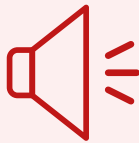
¹ “Tinnitus” refers to a persistent ringing or buzzing sensation in the ear, with no external sound stimulus.

There is real risk of irreversible noise-induced hearing loss due to recreational exposure, especially in adolescents and young adults:

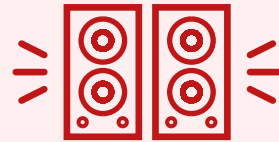
Nearly **50%** of teenagers and young adults (12–35 years of age) – i.e., **1.1 billion young people** – are at risk of hearing loss due to prolonged exposure to loud sounds, through listening to music on smartphones and audio players, or at music gigs and clubs.



Among those aged 12–35 years living in middle- and high-income countries, nearly **50%** are exposed to unsafe levels of sound from the use of personal audio devices.



Around **40%** of 12–35 year-olds are exposed to potentially damaging sound levels at clubs and bars.



Promoting and practicing safe listening is one of the simplest ways to prevent the occurrence of hearing loss that is caused by recreational exposure to loud sounds.



People with hearing loss, including noise-induced hearing loss, can benefit from early identification; use of hearing aids, cochlear implants and other devices; captioning² and sign language; and other forms of educational and social support. (Further information can be found in the *World report on hearing*.)

Sources of information:

[WHO's Media Fact Sheet on deafness and hearing loss](#)

[Make Listening Safe Campaign](#)

[WHO's World report on hearing](#)

² "Captioning" is the process of converting the audio content of a television broadcast, webcast, film, video, CD-ROM, DVD, live event or other productions into text, and displaying the text on a screen, monitor, or other display system.

3. Impacts of hearing loss

When unaddressed, hearing loss impacts many aspects of life including:

Communication and speech

Unaddressed hearing loss affects the way people connect and communicate; this can have a profound effect on language development in children and hamper communication among adults.

Cognition

Language deprivation can lead to delayed cognitive development in children, which can be avoided if suitable intervention is received during the initial years of life. In older adults, unaddressed hearing loss is associated with mental and physical declines and with higher rates of age-related dementia.³

Education and employment

In developing countries, children with hearing loss and deafness often do not receive schooling. Adults with hearing loss also have a much higher unemployment rate. Among those with hearing loss who are employed, a higher percentage are in lower grades of employment, earn lower wages, or retire earlier than their hearing peers.

Social and emotional

Although hearing loss contributes to social isolation and loneliness at all ages, these are experienced more specifically in people of older ages. The impaired ability to comprehend auditory information and maintain conversations may lead to avoidance of potentially embarrassing social situations. Lack of social engagement and loneliness, especially in older people, may further contribute to cognitive decline and depression.

Economic

Along with the distress experienced by individuals with hearing loss and the financial costs faced by families, WHO estimates that unaddressed hearing loss results in an annual global cost of 980 billion international dollars. This includes costs for the health sector (which exclude costs of hearing care such as hearing screening, hearing aids, implants or rehabilitation); costs of educational support; and costs resulting from loss of productivity.

³ See: [https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736\(20\)30367-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736(20)30367-6/fulltext).



4. What is unsafe listening?

Unsafe listening refers to the common practices of listening to music or other audio content at loud levels or for prolonged time periods. Sensory cells in the ears can start to become damaged by prolonged exposure to loud sounds. Listening to sounds at 80 dB for 40 hours a week is the limit of safe listening.

A sound of 80 dB is equivalent to the noise of heavy traffic heard inside a vehicle. The permissible time for safe listening decreases as sound levels increase. For example, a sound as loud as 100 dB – the level produced by a subway train – can only be listened to safely for less than five minutes each day. Music at clubs and concerts is often as loud as 110 dB, and some headphones can play music equally as loud when the volume is close to, or at, maximum level. Even a short duration of exposure to levels of such high decibels can be harmful. Habitual exposure over time almost certainly leads to tinnitus and hearing loss.

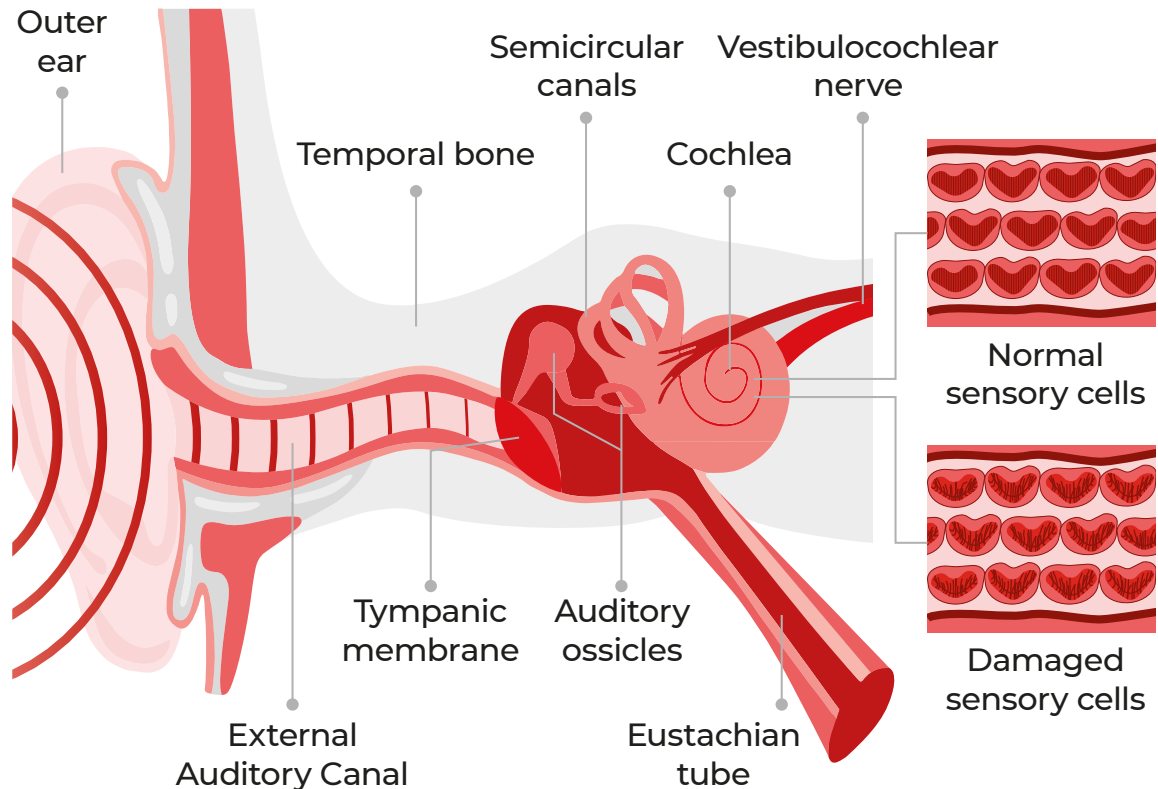
Sources of information:

The graphic on page 22 of this media brief presents information on permissible weekly exposure to sounds of different intensities. Further explanation can be found [here](#).

4.1 How do loud sounds affect hearing?

Sensory cells within our ears help us to hear. Exposure to loud sounds for any length of time causes fatigue of these sensory cells (Figure 1). The result is temporary hearing loss or tinnitus. A person enjoying a loud concert, for example, may afterwards experience muffled hearing or a ringing or buzzing in their ears. This often improves as the sensory cells recover. However, with regular exposure, particularly to loud or prolonged noise, damage of the sensory cells and other structures can be permanent, resulting in irreversible noise-induced hearing loss, tinnitus, or both.

**Figure 1:
Hearing mechanism and sensory cells**



Other causes of noise-induced hearing loss include loud bursts of sound, such as gunshots, explosions, or fireworks, or continuous exposure to loud sounds over time, such as working with loud machinery.

Loud noise can damage your hearing before you know it, causing permanent hearing loss and tinnitus – ringing or buzzing in your ears.

Recreational activities that pose similar risks include riding motorcycles, shooting/hunting, listening to music at high volume when using earbuds or headphones, and regular or prolonged visits to loud entertainment venues such as music concerts or nightclubs.

Noise-induced hearing loss can be immediate (such as when exposed to a sudden burst of loud sound); however, more often the loss is gradual, permanent, and frequently goes unnoticed or ignored until the effects become more obvious. Sounds may become distorted or muffled; a person may find it difficult to understand other people when they speak, especially in places where there is background noise such as in restaurants; or they may have to turn up the volume when watching the television.

4.2 How can hearing be protected?

Noise-induced hearing loss is irreversible. The good news is that it can be prevented through safe listening practices.

The volume of sounds, the duration of listening, and frequency of exposure to loud sounds all have an impact on hearing. The higher the level of sound and longer the duration, the greater the risk of hearing loss.

Tips for protecting hearing include (see [infographic](#) with tips for safe listening):

- **Keeping the volume down.** Listening to personal audio systems (devices such as smartphones or MP3 players through which music is played, and ear/headphones, as well as headphones with music playing capabilities) at a volume level below 60% of maximum is helpful in reducing the risk of hearing loss and tinnitus. Using carefully fitted, and if possible, noise cancelling headphones is also advisable.
- **Limiting time spent engaged in noisy activities.** Listening for a prolonged period of time can also damage hearing. When in nightclubs, discotheques, bars, sporting events and other noisy environments, taking short listening breaks away from loud noise reduces the overall duration of noise exposure. Equally, limiting the amount of time spent listening to personal audio devices will lessen the risk of hearing damage.
- **Monitoring listening levels.** Many devices, such as smartphone apps or listening software, use built-in safety features, such as volume limiting and sound level monitoring. These indicate precisely the levels of sound and duration of listening and provide an assessment of the potential danger of overexposure. Apps such as [HearAngel](#) and [dbTrack](#), or the hearing health app that is included in some smartphones, can be used for this purpose in addition to keeping track of the sound consumed and alerting the listener if the recommended limit (of 80dB for 40 hours per week) is exceeded.

- **Protecting ears from loud sounds.** This can be achieved by wearing earplugs in noisy venues and moving away from sources of sound, such as loudspeakers.
- **Heeding the warning signs of hearing loss.** It is critical to not ignore early signs of noise damage. Tinnitus; problems in hearing high-pitched sounds such as doorbells, phones or alarm clocks; difficulty in understanding speech especially over the telephone; and following conversations in noisy environments such as restaurants, are all signs that damage may have occurred.

Regular hearing checks are recommended – especially for those listening to music regularly or visiting loud entertainment venues. The [hearWHO](#) screening app can be used to check and track hearing status and to seek professional advice if a hearing test is failed.



5. Story ideas for journalists

Are you a journalist working on a hearing-related news story or feature and looking for a fresh angle that gives your report an evidence-based, constructive twist? Do you need a spokesperson who is an expert on the issue and can throw light on the neglected area of noise-induced hearing loss and its prevention? If so, here are some ideas:

1. Control the noise, before the noise controls you

If you think that hearing loss only affects older people, think again. Shockingly, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), not only are 430 million people currently living with disabling hearing loss, but more than 1 billion people aged between 12 and 35 years are at risk of hearing loss due to exposure to loud sounds at music gigs and clubs or on their devices. Problems with hearing loss start early but tend not to manifest immediately. Once a problem becomes apparent, it is usually too late. Take action now to protect your hearing.

Key facts:

- WHO estimates that as many as 1 in 2 young people is at risk of hearing damage from listening to loud music on their devices, and 40% are exposed to unsafe levels in venues. Consequently WHO is urging people to better protect their ears from prolonged exposure.
- Music at a live gig can be at levels up to 110 dB – safe to listen to for about half a minute only without hearing protection. The longer or more frequently a person listens to music at those higher levels, the greater the risk of developing permanent hearing loss or tinnitus.

2. People must understand that once they lose their hearing, it won't come back.

Many people are unaware of the risks of hearing loss; or if they are, they often think: “Oh, it won't happen to me.”

The truth is that listening to music that is too loud, or for too long, can trigger a problem that may never go away. This could be hearing loss or tinnitus – the experience of ringing or hissing in your ears – which can be temporary or permanent. If people knew how distressing these conditions can be, they would do more to protect their hearing. Tinnitus or hearing loss are mostly insidious in onset and people may not realize that they are developing hearing loss for a long time.

Key facts:

- WHO and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) have issued a new international standard for the manufacture and use of devices, including smartphones and audio players, to make them safer for listening.
- WHO has developed a global standard for safe listening entertainment venues. This standard outlines the essential and optional steps that must be taken to ensure that the risk of hearing loss is minimized for people visiting discotheques, concerts and clubs.
- WHO's [safe listening tips](#) provide advice to protect hearing.
- The Make Listening Safe campaign is a WHO awareness-raising campaign giving information on safe listening, especially targeting young people. (Information on this can be accessed [here](#).)

3. Tinnitus: don't let it be the soundtrack to your life

Without realizing it, millions of people are at risk of developing tinnitus through listening to loud music. Are you one of them? Find out why and how you should protect your hearing when at gigs and clubs and when listening to music using earbuds or headphones. Check out the simple steps you can take to ensure you can enjoy music safely throughout your life. Share the information with your friends.

Key facts:

- Read about [Tips for Safe Listening](#).
- Tinnitus is a ringing, buzzing or sound which does not come from an external source. Many people experience a bout of tinnitus after listening to loud music; sometimes it never disappears. Often it is a sign that your hearing has been damaged.
- There is no cure for tinnitus, but support and therapies can help to manage it.
- Information on WHO's work in prevention of hearing loss can be accessed [here](#).

4. Don't let hearing loss limit you. Is hearing loss affecting your work?

If you are experiencing hearing loss, simple adjustments can help you thrive at work, school or college.

Key facts:

- On [World Hearing Day 2020](#), WHO highlighted timely and effective interventions needed to ensure that people with hearing loss are able to achieve their full potential.
- For those who have hearing loss, appropriate support can facilitate access to education, employment and communication.
- Globally, there is lack of access to interventions, such as hearing aids, to address hearing loss.
- Early intervention should be made available through health systems.

Sources of information:

[WHO's Media Fact Sheet](#) on deafness and hearing loss

[WHO programme for ear and hearing care](#)

[Make Listening Safe campaign](#)

5. Personal experiences and comments

There are many personalities and music celebrities who have spoken of their experience with hearing loss and of learning the hard way: will.i.am revealed his battle with [tinnitus](#) four years ago.

The indie-pop rocker Grimes cancelled her entire European tour [due to hearing loss and tinnitus](#).

Coldplay frontman Chris Martin revealed his [10-year battle with tinnitus](#) in 2012, saying the condition gives him excruciating headaches.

Comedian and actress [Samantha Baines](#) has written about her experience of hearing loss and tinnitus at an early age.

To seek additional comments and clarifications on the topic of safe listening or if you have specific questions requiring an expert response, please get in touch with WHO media enquiries mediainquiries@who.int and whf@who.int.





6. What is WHO doing to address unsafe listening and the growing risk of hearing loss?

WHO is working with several stakeholders including audiologists, communication experts, public health professionals, the music industry and governments to address this “invisible disability”, raise awareness of safe listening, and tackle hearing loss.

The WHO-led [Make Listening Safe initiative](#) aims to promote safe listening and raise awareness on hearing loss due to recreational loud sounds. The main areas of WHO’s work are set out below:

1. Safe listening devices and systems

In 2019, WHO published the [WHO-ITU Global standard for safe listening devices and systems](#), which offers recommendations on safe listening features on personal audio devices. These features include:

- **A sound measurement function:** software that tracks the level and duration of the user’s exposure to sound.
- **Personalized profile:** an individualized listening profile, based on the user’s listening practices, which informs the user how safely (or not) they have been listening and gives cues for action based on this information.
- **Volume limiting options:** options to limit the volume, including automatic volume reduction and password-protected volume control.
- **General information:** information and guidance to users on safe listening practices, both through personal audio devices and for other leisure activities.

Sources of information:

[Press release](#) on WHO-ITU safe listening standard

[WHO-ITU Global standard for safe listening devices and systems](#)

[Safe listening video](#)

[ITU resources on safe listening](#)

2. Safe listening entertainment venues and events

Following a comprehensive review of existing regulations regarding noise, WHO, in collaboration with stakeholders, has developed a global standard for safe listening in entertainment venues such as nightclubs, bars, concerts and arenas. The standard provides six features to make consumption of amplified music safer and more enjoyable for the audience:

- i) Recommended upper sound level limit.
- ii) Ongoing monitoring of sound levels in venues and events.
- iii) Optimization of venue acoustics and sound system design.
- iv) Provision of hearing protection free of charge to audience members upon request.
- v) Access to respite areas where attendees can rest their ears from loud sound.
- vi) Accessible information to the audience before and during an event to confirm safe listening measures at the venue.

3. Raising awareness to change listening behaviours

WHO's approach to safe listening centres on changing listening behaviours. WHO has developed evidence-based awareness tools. These include awareness materials that are listed under Section 8.0 of this media brief.

Some relevant materials include:

mSafeListening handbook

This handbook includes a database providing messages for use in mHealth programmes for safe listening, along with guidance on their adaptation and use. The purpose of this tool is to assist countries to adapt and implement digital, message-based safe listening campaigns. (The mSafeListening handbook can be accessed [here](#)).

School module for safe listening

WHO is developing a module to promote safe listening among school-aged children. The aim is to inculcate safe listening practices among children through raising awareness and empowering them to make informed choices. This module is planned for 2022.

Sources of information:

[WHO's programme and activities on ear and hearing care](#)

[World report on hearing](#)

[WHO's wide range of advocacy resources on hearing care](#)

[WHO's Media Fact Sheet on deafness and hearing loss](#)

[Make Listening Safe campaign](#)

7. Talking about hearing loss

Deafness or hearing loss?

A person is said to have hearing loss when they are not able to hear as well as someone with normal hearing (i.e. with hearing thresholds of 20 dB or higher).

Hearing loss may be mild, moderate, severe, or profound. It can affect one ear or both ears, and may lead to difficulty in hearing conversational speech or loud sounds.

The term, “hard of hearing” refers to people with hearing loss ranging from mild to severe. People who are hard of hearing usually communicate through spoken language and can benefit from hearing aids, cochlear implants, and other devices, as well as captioning. Cochlear implants also benefit people who have more significant hearing loss.

People who are diagnosed as “deaf” mostly have profound hearing loss, which implies very little or no hearing. Deaf people often use sign language for communication.

Evidence-based reporting

“Scare” stories such as “WHO forbids listening to music for more than 4 hours!” or “Don’t stay in a club for more than an hour,” are unhelpful and alarmist. No one needs to stop listening to the music they love, but everyone needs to be aware of the limits and practice of safe listening. The facts and statistics provided in this brief may help your consumers make informed decisions about their hearing.

Language

The word “deaf” is a description of the condition of profound hearing loss, not of a group of people who cannot hear. Use the term “people with hearing loss” not “the deaf” as the collective term.

However, many deaf people whose first language is sign language consider themselves part of “the deaf community”; they may describe themselves as “Deaf” with a capital “D”, to emphasize their deaf identity.

Avoid words or terms that may have passive or “victim” connotations, such as “afflicted by”, “suffers from”, or “victim of” etc. The language used must respect people with hearing loss as active individuals with control over their own lives. The use of words and phrases such as “hearing loss”, “deafness”, or “a user of sign language”, “a person with hearing loss” is advised.

Common phrases that may associate impairments with negative things should be avoided, for example “deaf to reason”.

Approximate sound level in dB* and maximum permissible time per week for safe listening



* This graphic is based on the 3-dB exchange rate and the WHO recommendation regarding safe listening exposure and weekly time limit. The examples of sound levels are indicative. Actual sound levels may vary.

8. Digital media: a tool to promote safe listening practices

Digital media platforms are valuable resources for sharing facts and messages about safe listening and for raising awareness about the need to protect their hearing and prevent early onset hearing loss.

Please use the following hashtags when writing about safe listening:

#safelistening

#hearingcare

Suggested social media messages:

“Love your music, protect your ears! Practice **#safelistening**”

“Over 1 billion teenagers and young adults worldwide are at risk of hearing loss due to the unsafe listening to music at high volume. **#safelistening**”

“When it’s gone, it’s gone! Protect your hearing. Check out the WHO-ITU standard for smartphones & other devices, to make them safer for listening. **#safelistening**”

“Unsafe listening can lead to permanent hearing loss. Don’t lose the music, turn it down. **#safelistening**”

“Practice **#safelistening**. @WHO estimates that a billion people worldwide could be at risk of hearing loss due to unsafe listening practices.”

“Over 5% of the world’s population has disabling hearing loss. **#hearingcare**”

Visual resources:

[Advocacy materials for raising awareness](#)

[Infographic Make Listening Safe](#)

[Safe listening posters and flyers](#)

[Tips for safe listening](#)

[Frequently Asked Questions](#)

[Summary of WHO/ITU global standard for safe listening devices and systems](#)

[GIFs](#)

Annex:**Useful links**

Document	URL
Further information on the global costs hearing loss	https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33590787/
WHO's Media Fact Sheet on deafness and hearing loss	https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/deafness-and-hearing-loss
Make Listening Safe Campaign	https://www.who.int/activities/making-listening-safe
WHO's World report on hearing	https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/world-report-on-hearing
Brochure for Make Listening Safe	https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/documents/health-topics/deafness-and-hearing-loss/mls-brochure-english-2021.pdf?sfvrsn=bf19b448_5
Infographic with tips for safe listening	https://www.who.int/deafness/make-listening-safe/Tips-for-MLS-EN.pdf?ua=1
HearAngel	https://www.hearangel.com/
dbTrack	https://www.dbtrack.com/
hearWHO	https://www.who.int/health-topics/hearing-loss/hearwho
World Hearing Day 2020	https://www.who.int/campaigns/world-hearing-day/2020
WHO's programme for ear and hearing care	https://www.who.int/health-topics/hearing-loss#tab=tab_1

Document	URL
Tinnitus experience by will.i.am	https://hearingreview.com/hearing-loss/tinnitus/hip-hop-producer-and-musician-will-i-am-admits-he-suffers-from-tinnitus#:~:text=In%2520an%2520interview%2520with%2520the,silence%2520sounds%2520like%2520any%2520more.
Grimes concert and hearing loss	https://www.nme.com/news/music/grimes-82-1267144
Tinnitus experience by Chris Martin	http://www.mtv.com/news/2582277/chris-martin-coldplay-tinnitus-ear-condition/
Samantha Baines tinnitus and hearing loss experience	https://www.telegraph.co.uk/health-fitness/body/thought-had-changed-life-worse-actress-samantha-baines-hearing/
WHO-ITU Global standard for safe listening devices and systems	https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/safelistening-devices-and-systems-a-who-itu-standard
Press release on WHO-ITU safe listening standard	https://www.who.int/news/item/12-02-2019-new-who-itu-standard-aims-to-prevent-hearing-loss-among-1.1-billion-young-people
ITU resources on safe listening	https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Digital-Inclusion/Pages/Digital_Inclusion_Resources/Strategies,%20policies,%20toolkits/Toolkit_safe_listening_devices/safe_listening.aspx
WHO's programme and activities on ear and hearing care	https://www.who.int/health-topics/hearing-loss#tab=tab_1
WHO's advocacy materials on hearing care	https://www.who.int/activities/advocating-for-hearing-care
Infographic Make Listening Safe	https://www.who.int/deafness/make-listening-safe/Infographic-safe-listening-2019.pdf
Safe listening posters and flyers	https://www.who.int/deafness/make-listening-safe/MLS-English-poster.pdf?ua=1
Frequently Asked Questions	https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/deafness-and-hearing-loss-safe-listening
GIFs	https://www.who.int/campaigns/world-health-day/2019/communications-materials/gifs

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For more details refer to: www.who.int/health-topics/hearing-loss.

