

WHO-ITU Joint Stakeholders' Consultation on Safe Listening Devices

World Health Organization Headquarters, Geneva, Switzerland

1 October 2015

Background:

WHO estimates that 1.1 billion young people worldwide could be at risk of hearing loss due to unsafe listening practices (<http://www.who.int/pbd/deafness/activities/MLS/en/>). The current trend of regularly listening to music at high volume and for long duration poses a serious threat to one's hearing. Nearly half of all teenagers and young adults (12–35 years old) are exposed to unsafe levels of sound from the use of personal audio devices, and face the possibility of developing irreversible hearing loss over a period of time. Such hearing loss can be prevented through certain simple practices, such as keeping the volume within safe listening levels and limiting the time spent engaged in noisy activities.

While prevention of hearing loss through safe listening practices is the responsibility of the individual, the onus of raising awareness and creating an environment for safe listening lies with the community, manufacturers of devices, governments, and other stakeholders.

The growth of technology such as smartphones and MP3 players and its easy accessibility have led to the widespread use of such devices. While this poses certain threats to hearing, this same technology could be used to raise awareness about risks of unsafe listening and to promote safe listening practices. With advancements in technology, for example, listeners can now monitor the output levels of devices and limit their exposure to high intensity sounds.

The earphones and headphones used for listening also play a major role in influencing listening habits of the users. Devices with greater clarity and sound resolution and those with noise-cancellation technology can be listened to at lower intensity levels compared to others. It is possible to include appropriate safety features and provide information through the device interface, packaging and instruction manual. Due consideration to these factors can help to reduce individual exposure to loud music and prevent noise-induced hearing loss.

Objectives of the consultation:

1. To explore possible mechanisms and technology to reduce exposure to unsafe sound levels during recreational listening.
2. To raise awareness about safe listening practices among manufacturers of personal audio devices.
3. To review current knowledge about safety features in devices used for recreational listening.

Expected outcomes:

1. A common vision for promotion of safe use of personal audio devices developed.
2. An understanding of existing practices consistent with safe listening achieved.
3. Increased understanding of available technology and interventions for promotion of safe listening.

Participants:

1. Academia (audiologists, sound engineers/experts in noise exposure)
2. Representatives of manufacturers of audio devices, ear/headphones and music industry
3. Manufacturers associations
4. Civil society organizations
5. WHO and ITU

Date: 1 October 2015

Venue: World Health Organization Headquarters, Geneva, Switzerland

Agenda:

- Welcome and Introduction.
- WHO and ITU's vision regarding prevention of hearing loss due to exposure to recreational sounds.
- Current practices/technology to promote safe listening through personal audio devices.
- Stakeholders' perspectives.
- Conclusions and way forward.