IP/08/1492

Brussels, 13 October 2008

Scientists warn of health risks from exposure to noise from personal music players

Listening to personal music players at a high volume over a sustained period can lead to permanent hearing damage, according to an opinion of the EU Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENIHR) released today. The scientific opinion shows that 5-10% of personal music player listeners risk permanent hearing loss, if they listen to a personal music player for more than one hour per day each week at high volume settings for at least 5 years. The European Commission had asked the independent scientific committee to examine this issue, given the widespread use of personal music players and the surge in the number of young people exposed to such noise. Scientists confirm that there is cause for concern and the European Commission will now examine with Member States and stakeholders, possible measures that could be taken to better protect children and adolescents from exposure to noise from personal music players and other similar devices.

EU Consumer Affairs Commissioner Meglena Kuneva, said, "I am concerned that so many young people, in particular, who are frequent users of personal music players and mobile phones at high acoustic levels, may be unknowingly damaging their hearing irrevocably. The scientific findings indicate a clear risk and we need to react rapidly. Most importantly we need to raise consumer awareness and put this information in the public domain. We need also to look again at the controls in place, in the light of this scientific advice, to make sure they are fully effective and keep pace with new technology."

The current rules

A European safety standard already exists restricting the noise level of personal music players to 100 dB, but there is increased concern over hearing damage from excessive exposure to such sources. Such damage can be prevented to a large extent by measures such as reducing the noise exposure levels and duration. The EU Scientific Committee opinion highlights that users of personal music players - if they listen for only 5 hours per week at high volume control settings (exceeding 89 decibels) would exceed the current limits in place for noise allowed in the workplace. Users listening for longer periods risk permanent hearing loss after 5 years. This approximates to 5-10% of the listeners, which may be between 2.5 and 10 million people in the EU.

What will the Commission do now?

The European Commission asked for the scientific study, because of increasing concerns over threats to hearing, particularly for adolescents and children from leisure activities such as the use of personal music players. Based on this scientific evidence, the Commission is organising a conference in early 2009 in Brussels to evaluate the findings of the Scientific Committee with Member States, industry, consumers and other stakeholders and to discuss the way forward. The seminar will address precautions that users can take, as well as technical solutions to minimise hearing damage and the need for further regulations or revisions of existing safety standards to protect consumers.

What consumers can do?

Personal music player users can already take certain very practical precautions, such as checking their device to see if a maximum volume can be set so as to keep the volume lower, or they can lower the volume manually, and they can take care not to use the personal music player for prolonged periods in the interest of their hearing.

Background

It is well recognised that long-term exposure to excessive sound can harm hearing. To protect workers, limits have been set for the levels of noise allowed in the workplace. Environmental sounds to which the general public is exposed - such as noise from traffic, construction, aircrafts or from the neighbourhood - can be very irritating but are in most cases not loud enough to harm hearing.

In the last few years, **leisure noise** has become a significant threat to hearing because it can reach very high volumes and because an increasing proportion of the population is exposed to it, particularly young people. There has been increasing concern about exposure from the new generation of personal music players which can reproduce sounds at very high volumes without loss of quality. Risk for hearing damage depends on sound level and exposure time.

In recent years sales of personal music players have soared, in particular those of MP3 players. Overall, in the EU, it is estimated that roughly 50 to 100 million people may be listening to portable music players on a daily basis. In the last four years, estimated units sales range between 184-246 million for all portable audio devices and range between 124-165 million for MP3 players. Across the EU, many millions of people use personal music players daily and, if they use them inappropriately, they put themselves at risk of hearing damage.

The text of the opinion can be found at: http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_risk/committees/04_scenihr/docs/scenihr_o_018.pdf

The layman's version of the opinion:

http://ec.europa.eu/health/opinions/en/hearing-loss-personal-music-player-mp3/

Background on the SCENIHR

http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_risk/committees/04_scenihr/04_scenihr_en.htm