

Are noise-cancelling headphones impairing our hearing skills? Some audiologists are beginning to worry

Level 1: Elementary

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- Do you use noise-cancelling headphones? Why?
- What are noise-cancelling headphones for?
- Who usually uses noise-cancelling headphones?

2 Key words

a. Find the words from the wordpool in the article. Then use the words to complete the definitions.

affect
audiologist

autism
block out

ear infections
expert

processes
research

1. A(n) _____ is a person who knows a lot about a specific topic and is very good at it.
2. _____ are the ways that things happen or work.
3. To _____ means to change something or someone and to make them feel different.
4. _____ is the study and investigation of something to present facts and results.
5. A(n) _____ is a doctor who helps people with hearing problems.
6. To _____ means to stop a sound from being heard.
7. You have _____ when you have pain and redness inside the ear because of bacteria or viruses.
8. _____ is a medical condition that makes it hard for some people to understand and interact with the world around them.

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b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. After her hearing test, Maria saw a(n) _____ for more treatment.
2. My new computer _____ information very quickly.
3. Cold weather can _____ how people feel.
4. Scientists do _____ to learn more about the world.
5. Children with _____ may need a special teacher to help them with communication.
6. Stanley had _____ after swimming in the dirty river.
7. Sarah tried to _____ the loud music by wearing headphones.
8. Carlos is a(n) _____ at making pizza at his family's restaurant.

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Ian Sample
22 February, 2025

- 1 Many people use noise-cancelling headphones every day. They help block out loud sounds and make travelling in public transportation more enjoyable. But some experts are worried about how they might affect our hearing.
- 2 Audiologist Renee Almeida has noticed something interesting. More adults are coming to her clinic with hearing problems. But their ears are actually fine. The real issue is how their brain processes sounds.
- 3 People who use noise-cancelling headphones might find it hard to hear where sounds are coming from. They often find it difficult to follow conversations in noisy places like cafes or trains.
- 4 The medical condition, known as auditory processing disorder (APD), is often found in children, but the number of adults with the same problem was new to Almeida. She thinks that noise-cancelling headphones are causing APD.
- 5 Experts think too much use of these headphones could change how our brain work. "The brain is used to hearing many sounds at once," Almeida explains. "With noise-cancelling headphones, you only hear one sound."
- 6 Some experts know that people's hearing skills develop over time. Children learn to listen better as they grow older. Between the ages of five and fourteen, children improve at hearing sounds from different directions. However, problems like ear infections can make it harder for children to hear clearly.
- 7 No one knows for sure if noise-cancelling headphones cause problems. More research is needed, especially for young people. Professor Harvey Dillon says listening skills improve as children grow. Children with ear infections might have more trouble hearing sounds clearly.
- 8 Professor Dani Tomlin suggests that noise-cancelling headphones might actually help some people, like those with autism. But she agrees we need more research.
- 9 Almeida's advice is simple: practise listening. She suggests listening to radio shows, writing down song lyrics and paying attention to sounds around you. "Make an effort to listen to what's being said."

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3 Comprehension check

a. Are these sentences True (T) or False (F) according to the article?

1. Noise-cancelling headphones help people enjoy travelling. _____
2. People with hearing problems always have ear damage. _____
3. It is easy to hear people talking in a noisy café with noise-cancelling headphones. _____
4. Headphones can change how our brain listens to sounds. _____
5. Children get better at hearing sounds as they grow up. _____
6. All experts agree that noise-cancelling headphones are a bad thing. _____

4 Key language

a. Choose the correct option (a or b) to complete the sentences.

1. You _____ listen to loud music for too long. It can damage your ears.
a. can b. shouldn't
2. Young people _____ get ear infections if they share headphones.
a. might b. don't have to
3. You _____ forget to turn off your headphones when you are not using them.
a. mustn't b. need to
4. It _____ be difficult to hear someone when you have an ear infection.
a. shouldn't b. may
5. You _____ take your headphones off when crossing the street.
a. must b. can't

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Do you think it's a good idea to use noise-cancelling headphones a lot? Why or why not?
- Have you ever found it difficult to hear someone in a noisy place? What did you do?

6 In your own words

a. In pairs or small groups, find a short video such as a news report, a conversation or a set of instructions. Then find a pre-recorded sound clip of crowd noise, music or multiple voices speaking at once.

Student A: listens to the spoken text only.

Student B: listens to the same text with the background sound clip playing at the same time.

Student C: (optional) listens to the spoken text using noise-cancelling headphones.

b. Then discuss the following questions as a class:

- Who found it easiest to understand the text?
- How did the background noise affect what you could hear?
- Think about people with autism or APD. What auditory problems could they have in these situations where there's too much noise around them?
- What are some possible solutions to these problems?