

Welcome to the Jungle - The Art of Learning to Ride Skillfully

A column dedicated to your riding survival

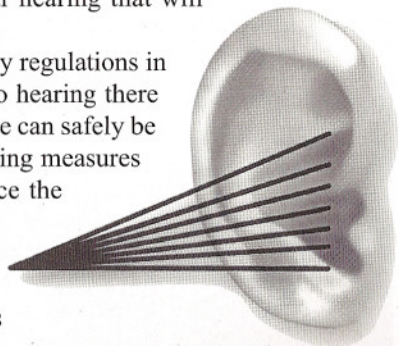
Listen Hear

Robert Laford

Do you remember that head-banging concert you saw when you were 19 and your ears were ringing for the next two days? Your ears still remember that. Do you remember those fireworks, that police siren, or that fire alarm, that made you shake your head because it made your ears ring? Your ears still remember that. Do you remember when you spent all day riding your motorcycle at highway speeds and at the end of the day you were mentally wiped-out and your ears were ringing? Your ears remember that.

As we age, many of us experience a reduction in what we can hear. Many of our spouses think that it is selective hearing loss, but the reality of the reduced hearing we have is mostly preventable and mostly because of the abuse that we have inflicted on our ears over our lifetime. Every time we experienced that ringing after being exposed to increased sound levels we have damaged our hearing. The inner ear has some very delicate workings with the smallest bones of our body and with tiny hairs that receive the sound-waves and send it to our brain for interpretation. When any of these components are damaged, either with an acute sound or a long-term exposure, we lose some acuity in our hearing that will never return.

In the working world there are safety regulations in place to help protect us. In regards to hearing there are documented levels of sound that we can safely be exposed to and others that require taking measures to either protect our hearing or reduce the sound levels we are exposed to on-the-job. The decibel (dB) is the measurement used for noise and 80 decibels is the threshold - below this



point it is unlikely to cause hearing loss. Above this, hearing protection regulations begin to limit the amount of time we can be exposed to noise. At 85 decibels hearing protection regulations for the workplace start to take affect to protect our hearing.

The “time weighted average” for noise exposure for a 24 hour period is: 8 hours for 90 dB, 6 hours for 92 dB, 4 hours for 95 dB, 3 hours for 97 dB, 2 hours for 100 dB, 90 minutes for 102 dB, 60 minutes for 105 dB, 30 minutes for 110 dB, and 15 minutes or less for 115 dB.

Pain begins at 125 decibels, and even short term exposure can cause permanent hearing damage at 140 decibels.

What does this mean to us as motorcyclists? We may think that we personally ride a bike that is not too loud, but the volume of the exhaust is not what affects our hearing as riders.

The silent killer of our hearing is the wind noise. A number of studies on sound levels regarding motorcyclists have all reached similar conclusions. At 30 mph the wind noise inside a full-faced helmet is routinely 90 decibels. At highway speeds that reading rises to 110-115 decibels. If that was our work environment we would be limited to riding our motorcycle to 15 to 30 minutes a day (without hearing protection). And those readings increase if wearing an open-face helmet, or no helmet.

Comparing Decibels

20 dB	Ticking watch
40 dB	Refrigerator hum
50 dB	Rainfall
70 dB	Washing machine
80 dB	Alarm clock (two feet away)
85 dB	Average traffic
100 dB	Blow dryer, subway train
105 dB	Power mower, chainsaw
110-115 dB	I-Pods at 80% volume
120 dB	Rock concert, thunderclap
130 dB	Jackhammer, jet plane (100 feet away)

Noise is all around us, whether we are on our motorcycles or not. We cannot sit in a sound-proof room all day listening to the silence. But as riders we need to consider taking an active role when riding so we can hear the silence, and those sounds in our world that are soft. Otherwise our hearing will continue to diminish and instead of being able to hear the quiet sounds, we will only hear those with a higher volume level.

For us riders there are a multitude of ear plugs that can be worn while on the bike that will assist in attenuating the wind noise, and reduce the level of the hearing-damaging sound. There are a number of different shaped designs within the world of disposable foam ear plugs, and they are all very inexpensive. When first trying ear plugs it is good to get a few different styles to see what works and feels best for you.

What is most surprising when you first wear ear plugs is what you CAN hear. You can still hear traffic, your engine, car horns and sirens. You can even still hear your intercom and music. You can actually hear your intercom and music clearer because what has been reduced is the wind noise.

After wearing the ear plugs, the next fact you will come to realize is how tiring the wind noise is to you mentally. By reducing the wind noise through hearing protection you will also reduce the mental fatigue that you feel at the end of a long ride. Like any other form of personal protection, ear plugs also become a habit. Have you ever altered what you normally wear for personal protection? Just a few blocks down the street from your starting point and you realize that something is not right. Something is missing. Riding without your hearing protection will be the same. It won't feel right.

Many people who faithfully wear hearing protection while on their motorcycles will use the disposable ear plugs forever. But there is a more personalized option in custom fitted ear plugs. These plugs, although more expensive, are molded just for your ear canal. They fit snugger and stay in your ear canal better, are more comfortable than the foam plugs; and offer



greater noise attenuation over the foam plugs.


Dealers for these products can be found through a local audiologist, where hearing tests are done and hearing aids are sold, and many larger motorcycle rallies will have custom ear plug vendors that will make your custom ear plugs while you wait. Your local audiologist could also answer questions you have about different disposable ear plugs and how to properly wear them.

Whether you decide that the foam ear plugs are for you, or you want to go to custom fit ear plugs, the ability to reduce the hearing-damaging wind noise on your motorcycle is well worth the investigation into adding this personal protection to your riding arsenal.

Hearing loss can be caused by factors other than the noise we are exposed to during our lives as well. If you are experiencing hearing loss, take measures to protect the hearing you have left; but also, see your doctor to investigate if other means are contributing to your decreased ability to hear.

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