



Hearing Health and Military Personnel

People serving in the military may likely be exposed to high-intensity noise of various types at some point during their service. Gunfire, helicopters, explosions, and many other combat-related activities routinely expose them to dangerous levels of sound. Some may develop hearing loss, (especially for high-frequency sounds), or tinnitus (“ringing in the ears”), or both, as a result of this noise exposure. One recent report estimated that as many as 28 percent of post-deployment troops currently living with hearing-related injuries.

Much combat-related hearing damage comes from the extreme decibel levels associated with gunfire and explosive devices. Unprotected exposure to sounds above 85 decibels for a prolonged period of time will damage the nerves in the ear. The approximate decibel level of a gunshot is 170 decibels and a missile launching can exceed 180 decibels. Damage caused by noise, called sensorineural hearing loss or nerve deafness, can be permanent and may then require medical care.

Another condition that noise-induced hearing damage produces is tinnitus. Tinnitus is a condition in which a patient experiences ringing or other internal head noises that are not produced by an external source. This disorder can occur in one or both ears, range in pitch from a low roar to a high squeal, and may be continuous or sporadic.

Hearing loss and hearing impairment can have a major impact on a person’s quality of life and these medical issues facing the men and women who serve in the military are not new phenomena. Since World War II, the human and financial costs associated with hearing loss among military veterans have repeatedly drawn attention to noise, hearing loss, and the need for hearing conservation in military settings. In 2008, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced it would increase efforts to fight hearing damage as the number one disability that troops face when they return home. The American Academy of Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery (AAO-HNS) applauds the efforts of the government to provide active-duty military with better and easier-to-use hearing protection, engaging in educational outreach to troops about protecting their hearing, and establishing hearing conservation test sites in combat areas.

Otolaryngologists, also known as ENT doctors, are the only physicians who specifically train to treat conditions of the ears, nose, throat, head, and neck, including issues related to hearing health.

Each year, the AAO-HNS and other allied health and medical organizations celebrate May as Better Hearing and Speech Month. This annual health observance is the perfect time to promote awareness of the hearing health issues that face our troops. For more information on Better Hearing and Speech Month and noise-induced hearing loss, including an interactive loudness scale and a hearing loss evaluation quiz, visit the AAO-HNS website at <http://www.entnet.org>.