

HOW TO PROTECT YOUR HEARING WHEN RIDING YOUR MOTORCYCLE

Words: John L. Stein

Unlike those lane-splitting lunatics and front flipping freestylers, you eschew needless risks. You also wear safety gear and don't ride buzzed or overtly speed. Minding risks is a great way to enjoy a lifetime of injury-free riding, right? Sure, when it comes to busted wrists. But surprise: Long-term noise exposure inherent in riding can significantly contribute to permanent hearing loss.

Dr. Phil Scheinberg is a licensed otolaryngologist (ear, nose, and throat physician). He is also a longtime car racer, a former streetbike rider, and all-around motorsports fan. "The inner ear's delicate hair cells (stereocilia) vibrate in response to sound pressure stimuli, starting the elegant process of turning acoustic energy into electrical impulses as specific sounds," he explains. "Unfortunately, these hair cells are vulnerable to the high sound pressure from race engines, wind blasts, Motorhead concerts, shop equipment, or Dirty Harry's .44. Once damaged, there is no surgical remedy."

Hearing loss often begins as the inability to discriminate high-pitched tones or even conversation clearly and may be accompanied by ringing of the ears (tinnitus). Logically, Dr. Scheinberg recommends people at risk wear hearing protection and also get annual checkups. And since damage is cumulative, if you're a parent of kids who ride, make them wear hearing protection so their motorcycling wonder years don't precede adult hearing loss.

Here are four strategies for protecting your hearing today.

USE PROTECTION. Store-bought foam earplugs can substantially lessen sound pressure in your ears. If they're uncomfortable have an audiologist fit you with custom-molded earplugs; these may not offer more protection, but if you'll regularly wear them, you win.

FIND A QUIET HELEMT. Schuberth promotes the C3Pro as “one of the quietest helmets in the world,” while Sena’s Smart Helmet has built-in noise canceling technology. For dirt riders, the Quiet Ride Helmet’s inflatable noise-reduction muffs physically cocoon the ears.

CONSIDER THE WIND. Among road bikes, nothing is quieter than a full-fairing tourer. That’s because the tall windshield creates a large pocket of relatively calm air behind it, in contrast to minimalist sport fairings that end to cause buffeting at helmet level.

KEEP IT STOCK. Want to hurt your hearing? Swap out OE intake and exhaust systems for great sounding free-flowing components. Socially motorcycling has had a noise target on its back for decades, but excessive sound damages both ears and image.

RIDE LIKE YOUR LIFE DEPENDS ON IT...

IT DOES!