

HEALTH

# Constant noise in NJ isn't just annoying. How it can trigger hearing loss, panic and more

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It should come as no surprise that loud noise is not good for your health.

But in the most densely populated state — where the space between neighbors is constantly shrinking — it's not just loud noises that have become a chronic problem for New Jerseyans. And it's not just the eardrums that are affected.

Being inundated constantly with unwanted noise may cause stress, add to hearing loss and even help bring about early-onset dementia, studies have shown.

“There was a time when society started recognizing the threat of air pollution and started doing something about its detrimental effects,” said Justin Yao, who leads a group of researchers at Rutgers University’s Brain Health Institute looking at noise-induced hearing loss. “Hopefully the spotlight shifts to noise pollution, because it affects all walks of life.”

Noise pollution is linked to a gamut of health effects. Much of it is centered around damage and hearing loss often experienced by those who work eight hours a day surrounded by loud noise, whether in a factory or at an airport.

**The price of noise:** Constant noise in NJ isn't just annoying. How it can trigger hearing loss, panic and more

But the prevalence in the past 20 years of earbuds resting just outside the ear canal has also increased the risk of early hearing loss, especially among 12- to 35-year-olds who wear them daily and for long periods.

## **Possible link between hearing loss and dementia**

Yao and his team are researching possible links between hearing loss and dementia. Does damage to our ears affect cognition? The working theory is that if someone is having a hard time hearing, the brain is working overtime to process sound and needs to use cognitive resources that will slowly erode over time.

“If you’re constantly being bombarded by noise nonstop, that can be damaging,” Yao said. “And we’re seeing that in many segments of daily life.”

Constant noise is not always a bad thing. A roaring fan, crashing waves, bird chirps and other sources of white noise are often used as a respite from the cold eeriness of complete silence.

But in many cases, noise is unwanted. Some people develop a condition called misophonia, a strong dislike of certain everyday sounds, such as chewing food or clicking pens, that can trigger anything from annoyance to a strong desire to flee.

**Hearing loss:** Yes, AirPods can damage your hearing. NJ experts share how to protect yourself

For others, noise induces stress. And with stress come health problems.

## **Noise can trigger high blood pressure, indigestion and panic attacks**

Intermittent noise — whether it’s the thumping of a stereo in the apartment next door or a blaring traffic jam outside a window — can increase blood pressure and heart rates, cause body aches and indigestion, and lead to sleep difficulties and even panic attacks.

New Jersey lawmakers recognized that back in 1971 when they passed the state’s Noise Control Act, which set the framework for local governments to develop noise ordinances.

Born from the act is a little-known advisory committee called the Noise Control Council that meets regularly to help set the standards for how much sound should penetrate New Jerseyans’ ears.

Budget cuts forced the Department of Environmental Protection to shut down its noise enforcement division in the 1990s. Enforcement is typically done by local health departments and police.

“The issues that come up don’t change that much,” said Stephen Szulecki, the council's chairman and a Rutgers professor, who has been associated with the council for 16 years. “They’re very cyclical.”

## **Noise Control Council helps regulate noise pollution in NJ**

Issues come before the council through resident complaints or from county or municipal health workers. An issue at the council’s forefront recently has been replacing old, air-siren-type devices to call volunteer firefighters to an emergency with text message alerts.

Another is dealing with retrofitted mufflers on cars — some modified for street racing — that create a roar heard for blocks. A bill — S507 — making its way through Trenton would restrict these kinds of mufflers.

“We’re primarily protecting people’s quality of life,” Szulecki said. “But we do have an impact on public health. Constant loud noise increases stress — and it’s well documented the role stress plays on a person’s health.”

**Noise in NJ:** Are your neighbors too noisy? Here's what you can do about it in North Jersey

A health inspector with a decibel meter cannot be everywhere at all times. And daily life in New Jersey’s suburbs is fraught with noise pollution. Ask anyone who has ever been disturbed by the deafening roar of a leaf blower from a landscaping crew next door or the ear-splitting thuds of a jackhammer from road workers.

Noise complaints are among the most tallied in local police departments' annual reports, but most come at night, spurred by complaints of loud parties, not the humdrum of daily life.

**Lowering the volume:** These 2 NJ cities are among the noisiest in the U.S. What they're doing to quiet down

Szulecki said it takes time to foster change and often requires a combination of tougher regulations and strong enforcement, but also industry realizing there is a problem and coming up with less-noisy solutions such as electric leaf blowers.

But there are times when business ventures outweigh eardrums. Trenton lawmakers passed a bill in 2012 that made beach bars and amusement parks exempt from the Noise Control Act — to the chagrin of Jersey Shore residents who live near them. “It goes back and forth, but I

think there has been a concerted effort over the years to address noise in this state,” Szulecki said. “It comes down to quality of life and what the public is willing to accept.”