

BY DR. NORMA RIVERA MRAZ

Dr. Norma Rivera Mraz earned both her Bachelor of Arts (1985) and Master of Arts (1987) degrees from the University of Florida. She earned her Doctor of Audiology degree (2004) from the Arizona School of Health Sciences. After 10 years practicing audiology in Florida, she moved to Atlanta, GA in 1997, where she focused her efforts in the treatment of individuals who are afflicted with tinnitus and hyperacusis (abnormal sensitivity to sound).

Dr. Rivera Mraz currently owns and operates Mraz Audiology Consulting, Inc., which specializes in hearing conservation, hearing loss, tinnitus, and hyperacusis. The patient population served is newborn to adults. Mraz Audiology Consulting, Inc. focuses on providing the highest quality of care and professionalism to address each patient's individualized hearing healthcare needs. Dr. Rivera Mraz speaks fluent English, Spanish, and Sign Language.

## EAR PROTECTION? REALLY?

We're ready to take that long-awaited, fun-in-the-sun summer beach holiday. Let's get packing! Swimsuit – check, towel – check, flip flops – check, water – check, suntan lotion – check, check, check! Every one of these items serves a purpose: swimsuit to cover up appropriately, towel to dry off and wipe away the sticky sand, flip flops to avoid scorched feet, water to stay hydrated, and sunblock to keep that beautiful skin from burning! Why does all of this matter? Well, let's focus specifically for a moment on the largest organ of the body – the skin – and the effects of sunburn. Direct sun exposure on unprotected skin not only turns the skin tomato red, but it also hurts at the slightest touch and can even blister (not to mention how unattractive it is to later have flaky skin fall off and peel away). The pain keeps you from wearing form-fitting clothes (or wanting to wear any at all); the water from a shower feels like pieces of broken glass raining down on your skin; quality sleep is not possible because laying down causes every part of your skin to feel like hot lava when it touches even the softest of sheets, which makes being "comfortable" a relative term. Neglecting to apply sunblock once or twice may be only temporarily problematic, but if the unprotected exposure becomes habitual, it can potentially lead to permanent or serious skin problems, from freckles to squamous cell carcinoma.

So, how does sunburned skin relate to our ears? Simply put, just like our skin, our ears need proper protection. Unlike our skin, ears don't shed and regrow. We get only one pair, and if we abuse them, they will surrender by way of hearing loss, tinnitus (ringing ears), and/or sound sensitivity.

Holiday gift giving is behind us, but the cool toys for the kiddies are worth mentioning. Be sure to research the noise levels of the toys you are considering before wrapping any dangerous "audible" gifts. Toy manufacturers offer an assortment of toys, from frivolous to educational. Some of these toys produce sound levels that exceed safe volumes for our little tykes (e.g., the Leap Frog Chat & Count Cell Phone emits 100 decibels of sound). The child gleefully pushes the brightly colored buttons and holds the phone close to his ears, and has unknowingly begun exposing his ears to dangerous noise levels that can cause permanent ear problems. Because these conditions are invisible, they can go undetected for a period of time. Since a child may not be able to clearly verbalize the problem, he may demonstrate it with inattentiveness, mood swings, behavior problems, and comprehension difficulties.

As adults, we all like to think we're invincible, but as incidents and accidents occur in our lives, we realize that's not the case. Using the proper ear protection germane to any loud activity in which we participate doesn't make us weak; on the contrary, it demonstrates that we understand the importance of protecting our ears so we can maintain our quality of life.

But isn't it true that exposing our ears to loud noise makes them stronger? FALSE! Exposure to loud noises doesn't build calluses in our ears that make them able to withstand damage. Our ears are delicate yet dynamic instruments that can endure a lot, but only within reason. In order to maintain our ears' optimal performance, we need only give them due attention. In return, our rewards are brilliantly experienced, from richness of sound to beauty of silence!

Loud noise doesn't bother me. Besides, I'm no sissy!

True. But it's not just a function of what bothers you at the moment but, rather, the long-term effects. As young, healthy adults, we don't think that excessive noise exposure (or excessive anything for that matter) is now or ever will be a problem in the future, but it will in some way or another. A person afflicted with hearing issues, whether it be hearing loss, tinnitus, or sound sensitivity, will inevitably ask one or both of these excellent questions:

"Why didn't anyone ever tell me how to properly protect my ears?" Sadly, there is no good answer to this question other than to say that it's a shame our education and medical communities have not put forth the necessary public awareness efforts to enable people to make smart choices in conserving their hearing.

"Isn't it too late for me to do anything about it now that the damage is done?"



Absolutely not! Education empowers us with the knowledge to take care of ourselves and our loved ones. It also teaches us to how to preserve what we still have and be proactive in addressing the ear problem that exists.

Hearing conservation products are readily available today. Call your audiologist to help you implement a hearing health care plan that addresses your particular needs.



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TINNITUS – HYPERACUSIS – MISOPHONIA  
HEARING LOSS – HEARING AIDS  
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