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Marching band — a threat to hearing?

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Enlarge By Thomas E. Witte for USA TODAY

Chris La Mar, 15, and sister Samantha, 12, now wear earplugs to indoor band practice at Dixie Heights High School.

By Joyce Cohen, Special for USA TODAY



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There's no bigger booster of his marching band than Mark Claffey. "I am a total band nerd!" declares Claffey, a drummer for the Golden Falcons at Franklin Heights High School in Columbus, Ohio.

There's just one downside. At age 17, he has painful ear damage.

He says that, after indoor rehearsals, his ears started hurting, then ringing.

Now, he's abnormally sensitive to sound. If someone cranks the car radio, "I get a sharp shooting pain in my right ear," says Claffey, who now wears earplugs when he plays.

The ringing in his ears is constant. "I get into a dead silent room and all I hear is my ears ringing," Claffey says.

It's the dirty little secret of the halftime show: Marching band, which exposes young ears to loud sounds, can cause irreparable hearing damage, according to Brian Fligor, director of diagnostic audiology at Children's Hospital in Boston.

Rock stars and music pros have known this for decades. But only in February did the National Association for Music Education issue a statement noting that music educators should recognize music as a cause of noise-induced hearing loss.

"The awareness of these issues is relatively new to the field," says Michael Blakeslee, the group's deputy executive director, adding that many hearing problems stem from young people's use of iPods and other such devices, which blast sound directly into the ears.

Typically, ear injuries don't heal, says Fligor, who says it's unconscionable that music students aren't taught to protect their hearing. "It's a tragic situation that is completely preventable," he says. There's no way to know who, like Claffey, is most susceptible to ear damage.

An estimated 2 million students in the USA play in middle- and high-school marching bands, along with 250,000 in college marching bands, says Drum Corps International. They practice for hours at volumes intended to "fill up a football stadium," often in small rooms that amplify sound, says Kris Chesky of the Texas Center for Music and Medicine at the University of North Texas in Denton.

Music ensemble is an "at-risk instructional activity, just like chemistry lab," he says.

SCHOOLS TAKE STEPS

Two of the nation's largest music schools, Michigan State University and the University of North Texas, are working to protect students' hearing. Remedies and research include:

- Free hearing tests
- Courses in occupational health
- Simulations of what noise-induced hearing loss sounds like
- Practice rooms lined with absorptive materials
- Monitoring of sound levels during rehearsals
- Earplugs given to music students

At UNT, Kris Chesky is experimenting with earplugs, having music ensembles perform the same pieces with and without them. "There are no known studies of musicians using earplugs," he says.

Hearing damage tends to be cumulative, and problems often aren't evident for years. Little data exist on how often musicians of any sort are affected, Chesky says. But in one survey of more than 3,200 musicians he did in 2000, 32% of drummers, 25% of tuba players and 18% of flute players reported hearing problems. All had around eight years of experience as professional musicians.

Measurements taken by Joseph Keefe, a 2004 graduate of Duke University in Durham, N.C., who was a drummer in the marching band there, show that band members were exposed to sound levels of more than 100 decibels (120 decibels is considered the threshold of pain) for hours at a stretch. At that intensity, unprotected ears can be damaged in just 15 minutes, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Now, at Duke, earplugs are mandatory for percussionists and optional for others, says Jeff Au, director of athletic bands.

Marching bands are safety-conscious in some ways. At Dixie Heights High School in Edgewood, Ky., the Marching Colonels wear sunscreen outdoors and take frequent water breaks. Ear protection never came up, says band director Robb Duddey.

Sure enough, Dixie Heights drummer Chris La Mar, 15, didn't hear a peep about protecting his hearing. All he knew was that his ears "hurt pretty bad" after his three-hour drum rehearsals. "The next day we do it all over again," Chris says.

Last year, a bandmate's father provided earplugs for the entire drumline. Chris, relieved, credits them with saving his hearing.

But his sister Samantha, who plays the bells, still gets headaches after practice. Samantha, 12, a middle-schooler who plays with the high school band, is reluctant to wear her earplugs. The first time she tried, she didn't hear the instructions and played the wrong passage. "My instructor yelled," Samantha says. Some students say earplugs look dumb or are inconvenient to use. They can prevent them from hearing both the instructor and the nuances of the music.

Special musician's earplugs are custom-made earplugs that do not block out too much sound, but

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Special musician's earplugs or custom-made earplugs tend to soften sound without too much muffing, but these can irritate the ear canals, Chesky says.

The real problem with marching-band culture, however, is that students are afraid to complain, says James Forger, dean of the College of Music at Michigan State University. "You are in a power structure, lining up, and you do what you are told," he says.

"There is an assumption that if you get injured, you are not strong or talented enough," adds his colleague Judy Palac, associate professor of music education. "The fact is, it is criminal to put students at risk."

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