

Hearing loss linked with dental tools

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U.S. scientists at the Oregon Health and Science University are exploring a possible link between high speed dental tools and dentists' hearing loss.

According to Robert Folmer, one of the study leaders, published research is mixed about whether high-speed dental tools contribute to noise-induced hearing loss over time.

"Over the years, we have seen dentists in the OHSU Tinnitus Clinic who were convinced that long-term exposure to sound from high-speed hand pieces contributed to their high-frequency hearing loss and tinnitus," said Folmer, an associate professor of otolaryngology. "These anecdotes, in combination with the research being divided about high-speed hand pieces playing a role in hearing loss, prompted our study."

Most current high-speed hand dental tools, such as high-speed drills, emit sounds of between 90 to 100 decibels, said Folmer. That's the equivalent of a gas lawnmower or other power tools, which are loud enough to cause hearing loss over time.

Folmer is conducting the research with high school senior April Kaelin, a student he's mentoring through Portland State University's Apprenticeships in Science and Engineering program.

Kaelin is to present the study Saturday, during a Portland State University symposium.

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