

Experts say cicada sounds could be problematic for those with tinnitus

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Not only is the emergence of Brood X cicadas after 17 years a physical nuisance, a Johns Hopkins Medicine nurse practitioner warns they also may be a noise hazard — and a potential cause of ringing in the ears. Credit: Graphic created by M.E. Newman, Johns Hopkins Medicine

With this year's return of cicadas, many will view the mostly harmless insects as an annoyance. However, the bugs' high-pitched buzzing sound—which can be loud enough to drown out a jet plane flying

overhead—could potentially worsen an ear-ringing condition known as tinnitus.

Tinnitus, a ringing sound inside the ears, has various causes including hearing loss, damage to the nerve ending in the inner ear, thyroid problems or exposure to [loud noises](#). More than 45 million Americans struggle with the disorder.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), exposure to sounds of cicada buzzing, which can reach 100 decibels, for 15 minutes can be enough to cause noise-related [hearing loss](#). The CDC says 100 decibels is approximately the noise level of a motorcycle revving or a jackhammer in operation.

"For those with tinnitus or any hearing challenges, it is important to address the level of noise exposure that can occur during the cicada season," says Rachel Hisim, M.S.N., C.R.N.P., an otolaryngology nurse practitioner who treats patients with tinnitus at Johns Hopkins Medicine. "Though we can't always remove the sound irritant from our environment, we can remove ourselves from certain environments to decrease noise exposure and the possibility of worsening ear ringing."

When outdoors during the cicada season, Hisim says it's reasonable to protect hearing with headphones or ear plugs. Or, she says, people can opt to stay indoors to limit their exposure during the periods when cicadas are noisiest (afternoons through dusk, if the weather is hot and sunny).

A sound meter app available from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health can help measure [sound](#) levels, says Hisim. The app may be accessed at www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/noise/app.html.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University

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