

STREET SAVVY

LISTEN UP!

Make hearing protection part of your essential riding gear

WORDS: Don Smith PHOTO: Joe Neric

No doubt you have a closet full of riding gear. You've probably got jackets, pants and gloves for every riding scenario, to say nothing of all those helmets. You might think that you're completely protected from harm, but if you're like many motorcyclists, you're probably overlooking one key risk. This potential injury can occur on every ride, no matter how long or how short, and it doesn't even require an accident to cause damage.

That injury is hearing loss.

By the time we reach age 60, one third of the population suffers from some degree of hearing loss. This degradation occurs both as a result of the natural aging process (presbycusis) and cumulative exposure to loud noises (lawn mowers, rock concerts and yes, motorcycles). Exposures progressively damage the cochlea, a critical part of your inner ear, and this damage is irreversible.

Motorcyclists are especially susceptible to hearing damage, and not just those who belong to the "loud pipes save lives" contingent. High-frequency wind noise actually does the most damage, and the faster and longer you ride, the worse the exposure (and resulting damage) becomes. At highway speeds, the wind noise inside a full face helmet can exceed 100 decibels. According to guidelines from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, more than 15 minutes of continuous exposure to

100 dB noise can result in hearing loss.

Long-term hearing loss isn't the only negative effect of noise exposure. Roadracers wear ear protection not only to prevent hearing loss, but also to fight fatigue and stress caused by constant wind and bike noise, which can slow their reflexes and hinder concentration. Iron Butt competitors and other long-distance riders also testify that they feel less tired at the end of a long day if they use hearing protection.

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Unlike most other protective gear, hearing protection is inexpensive and easy to use. Disposable foam earplugs are the most popular and effective. These can be found at hardware stores, pharmacies and gun shops, as well as motorcycle suppliers. A package of five pairs typically costs less than five dollars and can be reused numerous times before discarding. Most can be washed with soap and water, and a pillbox helps keep them clean when not in use.

Within the broad category of disposable foam earplugs there are several brands, types and shapes available. They even come in different sizes, making it essential that you try several styles and materials to find the fit that's best for you. Most riders prefer the "roll-down" foam plugs. These are rolled between thumb and forefinger into a tiny, tightly compressed cylinder that can be inserted to a comfortable depth. The foam material then swells to fill the ear canal, and

will attenuate 22-33 dB. Noise reduction is influenced by how well you insert and fit the earplugs, so be sure to follow the instructions carefully.

If you dislike having to roll the plugs each time before inserting, you can choose "no-roll" foam earplugs that utilize a built-in central stem that lets you push the plug into your ear canal in a simple, sanitary manner.

If you demand the ultimate in fit and protection, there are a variety of manufacturers that will craft custom earplugs built directly from foam or wax impressions of your ear canal. Custom-molded, reusable earplugs typically start at around \$100, and go up from there. Some are even available with built-in speakers.

High-speed travel on a motorcycle can easily produce windblast in excess of 115 dB—a level where exposure should be limited to less than 30 seconds. A foam earplug offering 33 dB of noise reduction will reduce that windblast to a very tolerable 87 dB—a level that can be safely tolerated for six hours. If you aren't already using ear protection, pick up some earplugs and use them on your next ride. They're much cheaper than a new helmet, jacket, boots or gloves, and just as important to your long-term health and safety. **MC**

