NOISE AND MUSIC LEVELS IN YMCAS AND YMCA PROGRAMS

Statement of the YMCA of the USA Medical Advisory Committee

Approximately 28 million Americans have some degree of hearing loss, many because they are exposed to environmental noise at cumulative levels that can damage hearing. Music volume in health and fitness facilities continues to be a concern in this regard. Studies have shown that loud music has the potential to cause hearing loss to facility staff and members. The use of music in YMCAs and in YMCA programs is common practice, viewed by staff and members as motivational, particularly during exercise. Music is often played in YMCA lobbies, locker rooms, weight rooms, exercise areas, and in classes held in aerobic studios, gymnasiums, multi-purpose rooms, and swimming pools. The use of individual headsets by members during individual exercise is also a common practice.

In many cases YMCAs are playing music in areas and programs where acoustics are not ideal. Also, group exercise instructors are often used to playing music at high volume levels as part of the “culture” of some forms of exercise classes. In light of these considerations, YMCAs run the risk of playing music at levels that can be damaging to the human ear for both staff and members. There is a growing concern about the rapid rate of hearing loss among individuals, particularly young people. Because hearing loss usually is a slow, cumulative process, staff need to be aware that the noise intensity and volume of music may be putting them and their members at risk even if no symptoms are apparent.

Research and data vary on the level of noise or music that can be tolerated by the human ear prior to damage occurring. The information related to noise levels is even more complicated when exposure time and individual tolerance level differences are considered. According to the federal government’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) guidelines, the permissible exposure level for employees exposed to noise is 90 decibels (dB) averaged over an eight-hour period.

YMCAs are committed to good health and have a responsibility to members, class participants, and staff to set and enforce appropriate levels for noise and music that are not potentially damaging to the human ear. Therefore, the YMCA of the USA Medical Advisory Committee recommends that local associations:

1. Evaluate the noise and music levels of facilities and programs. This can be done by placing a decibel meter (available from electronic stores for under $50) on a stand near the front or middle of the exercise room. Some music systems have built-in sound meters for this
Purpose. YMCAs may consider contacting their local health department or an industrial hygienist for a professional noise level assessment of their entire facility.

2. Set and enforce a standard that music volume levels should measure no more than 90 decibels (dB) in any area of the facility or in any program.

3. Educate members regarding the safe levels of music used in personal headsets during exercise.

4. Educate employees about the use of ear protection, especially exercise instructors who may be exposed to high intensity music on a regular basis and maintenance employees who find that certain tasks and/or areas of the facility have high noise levels, such as boiler rooms, pool pumps, and construction work sites. In addition, employees should be encouraged to have periodic hearing tests for their own health and safety.

5. Become familiar with OSHA compliance and penalties for noncompliance regarding noise levels in their facilities and programs.

6. Discourage practices in YMCA programs and activities that unnecessarily raise sound levels and could prove damaging, such as encouraging noise and screaming in camp programs and dining halls.

October 1990
Revised April 1997
Revised April 2002
Revised May 2007
Revised March 2008