An estimated 275 million people across the globe can’t hear clearly all the sounds they love. These people suffer from hearing loss, which the World Health Organization lists as the number one sensory disability in the world.

Some people never had their hearing, as they were born deaf, but the majority had something happen along the way that took it from them. Infectious diseases like meningitis, measles, mumps and chronic ear infections, as well as head and ear injuries, and aging all can contribute to hearing loss.

But perhaps the most common cause is excessive noise. Whether it’s a one-time exposure to an intense, “impulse” sound, like gunfire, or by repeated exposure to loud sounds over time, like machinery at work, noise has the potential to rob people of their hearing.

The effects of hearing loss extend well beyond having to turn up the television. It strains a person’s ability to understand conversations, which can cause problems and misunderstandings at work and at home. Hearing loss also leads to isolation from family, friends and the environment.

“The good news is noise-induced hearing loss is preventable,” says Dr. Laurie Wells, audiologist in 3M’s hearing protection business. “So many people could be spared from it, if they just took a few easy steps.”

Step 1: Wear hearing protection
The most important step to preventing hearing loss is to wear hearing protection.

“There are many great hearing protection options, but sometimes it’s a challenge to know which to choose and how and when to wear it correctly,” says Wells. “Hearing protection is now available that is comfortable, fits well, and includes options to enhance communication - like microphones and two-way radio connections for people who need them.”

Step 2: Be mindful around the clock
Sounds louder than 85 decibels (dBA) are more common than people might think. Prolonged exposure to these high-level sounds can permanently damage your hearing, and cause ringing in the ears, along with other symptoms. Most people don’t carry decibel meters, so it’s good to know where those sound levels can occur. Some examples include:

- Attending a football game (100 to 120 dBA)
- Using a leaf blower or chainsaw (95-120 dBA)
- Riding a motorcycle (80-110 dBA)
• Using a lawn mower (82-103 dBA)
• Attending a rock concert (90-120 dBA)
• Listening to a personal music player (75-114 dBA)
• Shooting firearms (140 to 165 dBA)
• Watching a movie at the theater (72-104 dBA)

Hearing these sounds occasionally, for a limited time, isn’t a major threat to hearing. But repeated exposure to loud sounds can cause hearing damage over time. Many people – like mine workers, police officers, construction workers, farmers and others, work in noise that is 85 dBA or higher every day on the job. As a result, noise-induced hearing loss is one of the most common occupational diseases and the second most self-reported occupational illness, according to National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Step 3: Reduce the Volume or Increase Distance
Work-related noise might be unavoidable, but many times, you can be in control of the noise around you. Whenever possible, select quieter vacuums, chain saws, leaf blowers, power tools, etc. Also, be aware that the volume controls on portable entertainment devices can exceed 110 dB – levels that may be hazardous if you listen for many hours a day. Lower the volume and limit how long you listen to them. If you aren’t able to turn down loud sounds you encounter, take a few steps back from the source of the loud sound. Even a few feet of distance between you and a loud sound can lower the decibel levels that hit you.

Step 4: Take the Hearing Pledge
Make a commitment to wear hearing protection so you can continue to enjoy all the sounds you love. 3M has launched the Hearing Pledge. Go to www.hearingpledge.com and commit to wearing your hearing protection. Those who pledge can enter a drawing to win a free iPod touch mobile digital device, equipped with audio-limiting headphones that keep sound levels at or below 82 dBA.
To learn more, visit www.hearingpledge.com or “Like” us on Facebook at http://on.fb.me/16vhWEO.