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Published: 08/06/2006  

Be good to your ears: Get the right headphones

By Help Desk
Al Gordon

It hasn't been a great summer for my ears: First there was the construction project outside. Then came the heat and the noisy window air conditioner. Finally, there is the pounding from a remodeling job in a unit upstairs. So how to hear myself think?

Headphones.

But not just any headphones - something that deadens noise is required. Active noise reduction phones, which use electronics to cancel out sounds, work best with constant background noise and don't help much with hammering and drilling. So that leaves two options: earplug-type earphones and sealed headphones.

Earplugs are the most effective way to quiet outside noise. Unlike the ear buds that ship with most music players and sit on top of your ear canal, these are inserted into the canal until a tight seal is formed. While there are some inexpensive units around, they aren't much of an improvement over standard buds. A true upgrade would be the higher end products known as "in-ear monitors." Once a small niche primarily for musicians and audiophiles, the popularity of the iPod has boosted sales of these items.

Case in point: Ultimate Ears, a boutique company whose flagship product was \$1,000 custom-fit, custom-made plug earphones, has entered the consumer market with its super.fi 3, aimed at portable users, and the audiophile super.fi 5. These units have very

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impressive sound, with well-rounded frequency response and more convincing bass than is typical for plugs. Ironically, however, given the company's custom-fit origins - they also are among the least comfortable to wear.

The old standby in this category Etymotic Research, with its ER6i moderate-priced earphone and high-end ER4P, are unmatched for clarity and a little easier to insert in your ears. They perform well with a wide range of music, although hard rockers may find them lacking in bass.

The bottom line here is that if you pursue one of these options, be sure you buy from an outlet that will let you return them. Finding the right sound and right fit is very tricky.

Many consumers, however, don't like the idea of sticking something in their ear. For them, the task of finding headphones is even trickier. You need to go with what are called "sealed" headphones - headphones that have a closed shell and use their bodies to shield out sound. The problem, according to Mike Torlone of AKG Acoustics, is that there are always trade-offs in these designs. Headphones essentially are small speakers, and closed architecture limits their ability to generate sound waves.

The upshot is that despite auditioning a parade of headphones, there were not all that many I am prepared to suggest. One is AKG's K 27i, a smaller on-the-ear design that seals over your ear canal (as opposed to the full-sized over-the-ear designs that cover your entire ear). It folds up for easy traveling, has a built-in volume slider switch, and comes with a zipper case. It is in the inevitable iPod-esque white/silver motif. If you have a black iPod, the K 26p is essentially the same headphone minus the volume control. Sound and comfort are very good for the money. Alternatively, if you prefer a full-sized headphone, Sennheiser's HD 205 has a comparable price and sound.

Sennheiser's HD 25 (typically used by broadcasters and recording engineers) is an excellent high-end choice, with exciting sound, superior noise blocking, and good compatibility with iPods. Its downside is that it clamps tightly on your ears, which is not the most comfortable thing in the world. The elegant-sounding AKG K 271S is more comfortable, but alas needs more power than iPods can muster.

But I am not so sure that high-end sealed cans are an ideal consumer choice. You may be better off spending your money on moderately priced sealed units and putting your audiophile money into high caliber headsets with conventional "open" designs that will deliver much superior sound for the money: Sennheiser's HD 515/555/595 series or AKG's 501/601/701 line. Here again iPods are inadequate for the AKGs but work well with the Sennheisers.

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Then, again, you can solve the power problem with a headphone amp. Montana-based Headroom (www.headphone.com) makes a \$200 unit called the Total BitHead that can either be plugged into a USB port on your computer or connect via audio cable to a music player. That means better sound from high-end headphones and, on the computer, less electronic noise from system components.

On top of that, the BitHead includes circuitry that minimizes the exaggerated stereo separation you hear through headphones. When you listen to speakers, your left ear hears sound from the right channel as well as the left, and vice versa. But in headphones the two channels are completely separated and your brain has to sort that out. The crossover circuitry compensates for that.

Just one more way to be nice to your ears.

Al Gordon is a Massachusetts-based media and political consultant who also writes about technology. You can read more of his articles at www.algordon.com/techblog.html and e-mail him at eagle@algordon.com.



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