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Posted on Thu, Mar. 09, 2006

TEST DRIVE | HEADPHONES

Device still lets your MP3 music play -- just a little less noisily

TONYA JAMESON
Pop Culture Writer

Visit any gym and you'll see nearly everyone wearing some kind of MP3 player. White or black chords link them to their precious songs. For the gym rat, the MP3 player allows you to drown out the gym's music, televisions and that guy who just won't stop trying to talk to you while you're doing curls.

Some health experts, however, are concerned about possible hearing loss related to prolonged use of the players. But MP3 player-users don't have to worry thanks a number of noise-canceling headphones available at area electronics stores and on the Internet.

The Observer unscientifically tested three types at the gym and in the office. The bulky over-the-ear kind were lighter than anticipated, and all needed a battery. All three have the same effect: Once you turn them on it's like someone has covered your ears with their hands.

Centrios' noise- canceling headphones

(\$39.99, Circuit City)

These are great for people on a budget. They cover yours ears, are foldable, comfortable and relatively light. Despite the size, they weren't distracting at the gym while lifting weights or running. When wearing these, the volume on the MP3 player is about one-quarter less than with standard earbuds. In the office, the headsets effectively blocked out loud-talking co-workers without requiring the volume to be turned up more than you would usually. They also come with a carrying case.

Pro Tech's Noise Buster Model NB-FX

(\$69.99, www.noisesbuster.com, 800-468-8371)

For comfort and fit, these were comparable to the Centrios. They're also foldable and come with a carrying case. They decreased noise slightly better. In the gym, the volume was



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turned up about 50 percent less than typical. These worked well jogging on the sidewalk down a busy street on a windy day. If you're stuck on an airplane with a crying baby, this is the headset for you. Loud-talking co-workers? You won't even know they're there.

Sony MDR-NC11A

(\$99.99, Circuit City)

Disappointing. These are earbuds instead of the bulky over-the-ear sets. Their noise-canceling ability is comparable to the Noisebuster and Centrios. They're lighter than the other sets, but they failed the gym test. They wouldn't stay firmly in the ear on the Elliptical machine or when lying down on a bench press. Plus, on the other headsets the battery compartment is on the main headset. On the Sony, it dangles from the cord, which makes it cumbersome, and the little belt clip for it isn't effective.

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