

# ACOUSTICS

## PHYSICAL HEALTH

### Talking Points

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**Figure 1:**  
Sound-absorptive finishes in family spaces of Golisano Children's Hospital to limit noise transmission levels between gathering spaces, and areas intended for administrative work, treatment and instruction, or where sensitive patient information is shared.

*Source: A Sound Plan, Healthcare Design Magazine 2016*

#### Keywords:

Noise, Emotion, Health Hospital, Sound perception, Stress reduction, Environment

#### CONTENT OVERVIEW

- I. General Physiological Impacts
- II. Improved health outcomes
- III. Effects on Sleep
- IV. Impact on At-risk Populations
- V. Increased Rate of Rehospitalization
- VI. Noise Induced Hearing Loss
- VII. References

#### ACOUSTICS + PHYSICAL HEALTH SUMMARY

Acoustics can have significant effect on physical health. Quality acoustics can improve health outcomes for hospital staff as well as patients and their families. Poor acoustics, however, can negatively impact sleep and recovery rates, and contribute to long-term health outcomes such as cardiovascular disease and noise-induced hearing loss.

## I. General Physiological Impacts

- i. Agreeable acoustic conditions with a balance of silence and noise can improve health outcomes for hospital staff as well as patients and their families
- ii. Poor acoustics, however, can negatively impact physical health
  - a. Infants in the NICU may exhibit decreased oxygen saturation, elevated blood pressure, increased heart and respiration rate, and worsened sleep
  - b. High noise exposure may also cause increased awakenings, sleep loss, and sleep fragmentation in adults
  - c. Constant noise exposure increases rate of patient rehospitalization and medication
  - d. Noise induced hearing loss and occupational induced hearing loss are increasingly common in industrialized communities

## II. Improved Health Outcomes

- i. Masking of ambient hospital sounds, such as beeping machines and wailing alarms, with acoustic treatment and music has numerous health benefits
  - a. Facilitation of social connection between staff, patients and their families
  - b. Acoustic treatment can elicit positive emotions, which are shown to encourage faster recovery
  - c. Can induce an analgesic effect, reducing stress, blood pressure and post-operative trauma when matched with silence



Figure 2. Neuroimaging studies on music and emotion suggest that music can modulate activity in brain structures that are known to be crucially involved in emotion.

Source: Iyendo 2016

**III. Effects on Sleep**

- i. High noise has contributed to increased sleep loss and awakening and sleep fragmentation
  - a. Sounds as low as 33dB able to induce physiological reactions during sleep including autonomic, motor, and cortical arousal (eg. tachycardia, body movements, and awakening)
- ii. Short-term noise induced sleep disturbance include impaired mood, subjectively and objectively increased daytime sleepiness, and impaired cognitive performance
- iii. Repeated noise-induced arousals interfere with sleep quality through changes in sleep structure, which include delayed sleep onset and early awakenings, reduced deep (slow-wave) and rapid eye movement sleep, and an increase in time spent awake and in superficial sleep stages.
  - a. This nocturnal noise exposure may be a larger contributor to long-term health outcomes like cardiovascular disease than daytime noise exposure.

**IV. Impact on At-risk Populations**

- i. Neonates, long-term patients, and elderly people are thought to be particularly at-risk to the effects of noise.
  - a. The sound environment in hospitals, especially in intensive care units, can be characterised by irregularly occurring noises from sources such as medical devices (eg, alarms and beeping), telephones or pagers, conversations, door sounds, and nursing activities
  - b. Noise worsens patient health outcomes through factors such as increased cardiovascular stress, longer healing times, increases in doses of pain-relief drugs, and increased patient readmission rates

**V. Increased Rate of Medication and Rehospitalization**

- i. A study of patients with coronary artery disease found that there was a significantly higher frequency for the need of extra intravenous beta-blockers in the group during bad acoustics rehospitalization rate at 3 months was significantly higher in the group of bad acoustics
  - a. This also may have a negative impact on the rehabilitation period.
  - b. Increased medication and rehospitalization, especially of at-risk patient populations, is not only counter-productive to healing, it is also costly in terms of facilities and staffing

Mann–Whitney *U*-tests comparing bad with good acoustics for total groups (T) and myocardial infarction groups (AMI)

	<i>z</i> (T)	<i>p</i> (T)	<i>z</i> (AMI)	<i>p</i> (AMI)
Health care in general	-2.00	0.046	-1.93	0.054
Staff attitude quality	-2.90	0.004	-2.62	0.009
Waking due to sounds	-1.98	0.048	-1.92	0.054
Can hear what staff say	-0.01	0.99	-0.87	0.39
Sounds from corridor	-2.03	0.04	1.86	0.06
Disturbed by sounds	-1.58	0.12	-0.47	0.64

Minus indicates that the score is better in the good acoustics period.

Figure 3: The results of the comparisons between groups of hospital patients in "good" and "bad" acoustics conditions.  
Source: Hagerman 2004

## V. Noise-induced Hearing Loss and Damage

- i. Global Burden of Disease 2010 estimated that 1.3 billion people are affected by hearing loss and investigators rated hearing loss as the 13th most important contributor (19.9 million years, 2.6% of total number) to the global years lived with disability (YLD)
  - a. Occupational noise-induced hearing loss is well recognised in industrial settings like construction and manufacturing, but occupations such as musicians, those working in the military, or aeronautics are also significantly affected
- ii. Noise levels in hospitals are now typically more than LAeq 15–20 dB higher than those recommended by WHO
  - a. Hospital noise could therefore be an increasing threat to patient rehabilitation and staff performance

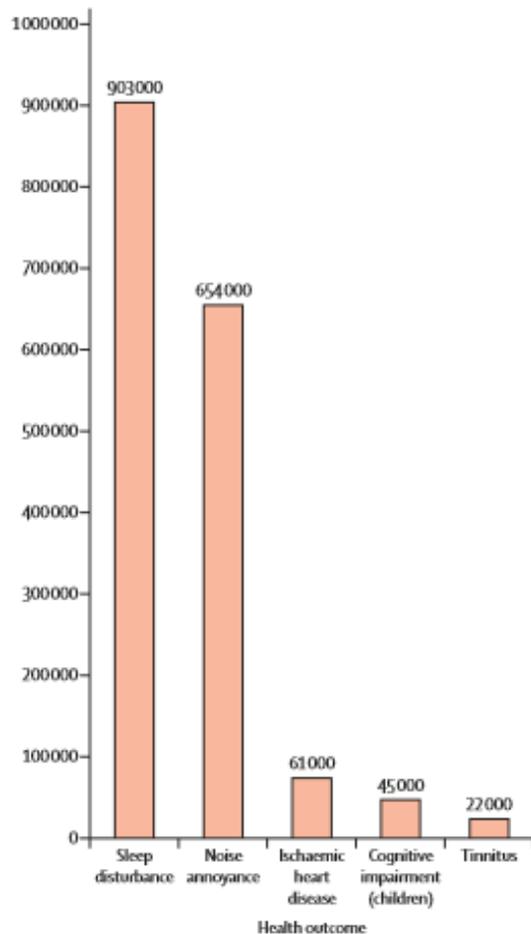


Figure 4:  
DALYs attributed to environmental noise exposure in Europe. According to World Health Organization, more than 1 million healthy life years (DALYs) are lost annually because of environmental noise exposure in European A-member states alone. Most of these DALYs can be attributed to noise-induced sleep disturbance and annoyance. DALYs=Disability-adjusted life years.

Source: Basner 2014

## VII. KEY REFERENCES

### Review Articles

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### Primary Research

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### Popular Press

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- ["Noise Exposure is Becoming 'the new secondhand smoke'" - The Washington Post](#)
- ["A Healthy Return: The Business Case for Well-Being in the Workplace" - Metropolis Magazine](#)
- ["A Sound Plan: How to Achieve Optimal Healthcare Acoustics" - Healthcare Design Magazine](#)