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Alec N. Salt¹ and James A. Kaltenbach²

Abstract

Wind turbines generate low-frequency sounds that affect the ear. The ear is superficially similar to a microphone, converting mechanical sound waves into electrical signals, but does this by complex physiologic processes. Serious misconceptions about low-frequency sound and the ear have resulted from a failure to consider in detail how the ear works. Although the cells that provide hearing are insensitive to infrasound, other sensory cells in the ear are much more sensitive, which can be demonstrated by electrical recordings. Responses to infrasound reach the brain through pathways that do not involve conscious hearing but instead may produce sensations of fullness, pressure or tinnitus, or have no sensation. Activation of subconscious pathways by infrasound could disturb sleep. Based on our current knowledge of how the ear works, it is quite possible that low-frequency sounds at the levels generated by wind turbines could affect those living nearby.

Keywords

cochlea, hair cells, A-weighting, wind turbine, Type II auditory afferent fibers

Wind Turbines Generate Infrasound

The sounds generated by wind turbines vary widely, depending on many factors such as the design, size, rotor speed, generator loading, and different environmental conditions such as wind speed and turbulence (e.g., Jakobsen, 2005). Under some conditions, such as with a low wind speed and low generator loading, the sounds generated appear to be benign and are difficult to detect above other environmental sounds (Sonus, 2010).

But in many situations, the sound can contain a substantial low-frequency infrasound component. One study (Van den Berg, 2006) reported wind turbine sounds measured in front of a home 750 m from the nearest turbine of the Rhede wind farm consisting of Enercon E-66 1.8 MW turbines, 98 m hub height, and 35 m blade length. A second study (Jung & Cheung, 2008) reported sounds measured 148 to 296 m from a 1.5 MW turbine, 62 m hub height, 36 m blade length. In both these studies, which are among the few publications that report full-spectrum sound measurements of wind turbines, the sound spectrum was dominated by frequencies below 10 Hz, with levels of over 90 dB SPL near 1 Hz.

The infrasound component of wind turbine noise is demonstrated in recordings of the sound in a home with GE 1.5 MW wind turbines 1,500 ft downwind as shown in Figure 1. This 20-second recording was made with a microphone capable of recording low-frequency components. The sound level over the recording period, from which this excerpt was taken, varied from 28 to 43 dBA. The audible and inaudible (infrasound) components of the sound are demonstrated by

filtering the waveform above 20 Hz (left) or below 20 Hz (right). In the audible, high-pass filtered waveform, the periodic “swoosh” of the blade is apparent to a varying degree with time. It is apparent from the low-pass filtered waveform that the largest peaks in the original recording represent inaudible infrasound. Even though the amplitude of the infrasound waveform is substantially larger than that of the audible component, this waveform is inaudible when played by a computer’s sound system. This is because conventional speakers are not capable of generating such low frequencies and even if they could, those frequencies are typically inaudible to all but the most sensitive unless played at very high levels. It was also notable in the recordings that the periods of high infrasound level do not coincide with those times when the audible component is high.

This shows that it is impossible to judge the level of infrasound present based on the audible component of the sound. Just because the audible component is loud does not mean that high levels of infrasound are present. These measurements show that wind turbine sounds recorded inside a home can contain a prominent infrasound component.

¹Washington University, St. Louis, MO, USA

²Lerner Research Institute/Head and Neck Institute, Cleveland, OH, USA

Corresponding Author:

Alec N. Salt, Department of Otolaryngology, Box 8115, Washington University School of Medicine, 660 South Euclid Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63110, USA

Email: salta@ent.wustl.edu

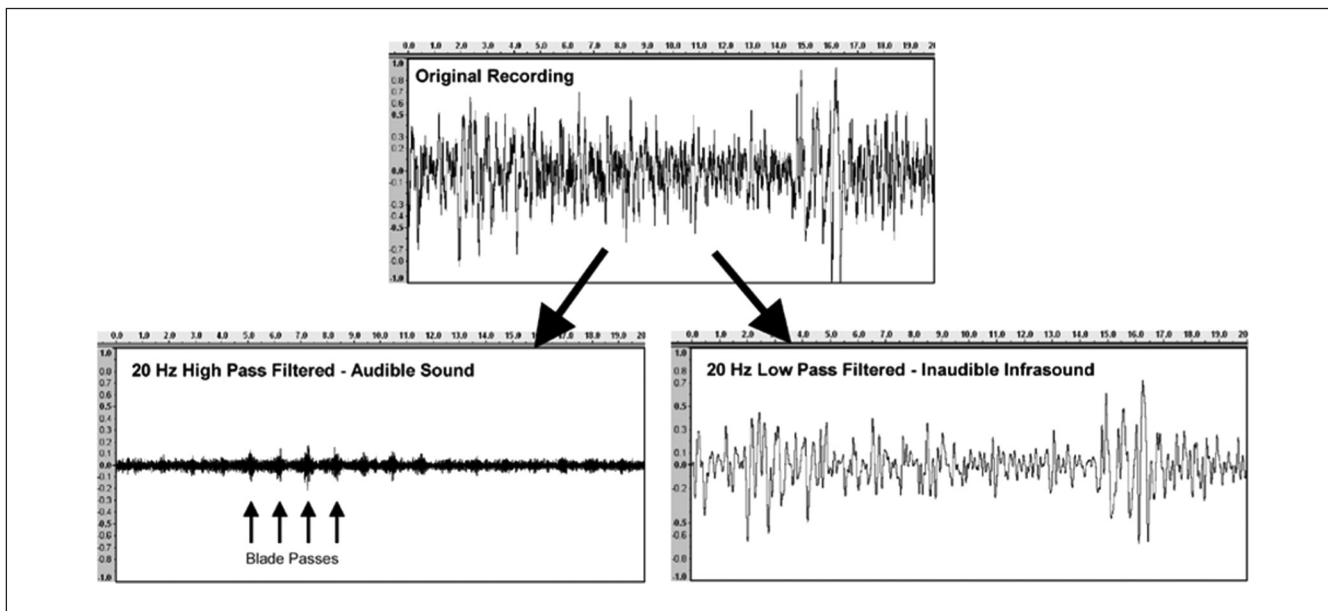


Figure 1. Upper Panel: Full-spectrum recording of sound from a wind turbine recorded for 20 seconds in a home with the wind turbine 1,500 ft downwind (digital recording kindly provided by Richard James). Lower Left Panel: Result of high-pass filtering the waveform at 20 Hz, showing the sound that is heard, including the sounds of blade passes. Lower Right Panel: Result of low-pass filtering the waveform at 20 Hz, showing the infrasond component of the sound

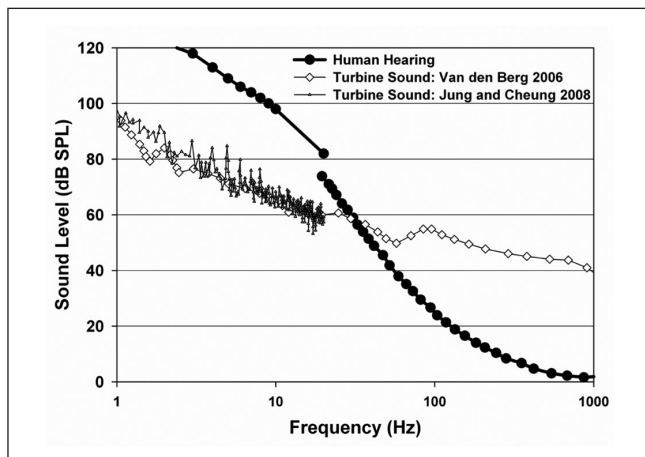


Figure 2. Wide band spectra of wind turbine sounds (Jung & Cheung, 2008; Van den Berg, 2006) compared with the sensitivity of human hearing (International Organization for Standardization, 2003, above 20 Hz; Møller & Pederson, 2004, below 20 Hz). The levels of sounds above 30 Hz are above the audibility curve and would be heard. Below 30 Hz, levels are below the audibility curve so these components would not be heard

Wind Turbine Infrasond Is Typically Inaudible

Hearing is very insensitive to low-frequency sounds, including those generated by wind turbines. Figure 2 shows examples of wind turbine sound spectra compared with the sensitivity of human hearing. In this example, the turbine sound components above approximately 30 Hz are above threshold and therefore audible. The sounds below 30 Hz, even though they

are of higher level, are below the threshold of audibility and therefore may not be heard. Based on this comparison, for years it has been assumed that the infrasond from wind turbines is not significant to humans. Leventhall (2006) concluded that “infrasond from wind turbines is below the audible threshold and of no consequence.” (p.34) Leventhall (2007) further stated that “if you cannot hear a sound you cannot perceive it in other ways and it does not affect you.” (p.135)

Renewable UK (2011), the website of the British Wind Energy Association, quotes Dr. Leventhall as stating, “I can state quite categorically that there is no significant infrasond from current designs of wind turbines.” Thus, the fact that hearing is insensitive to infrasond is used to exclude the possibility that the infrasond can have any influence on humans. This has been known for many years in the form of the statement, “What you can’t hear can’t affect you.” The problem with this concept is that the sensitivity of “hearing” is assumed to equate with sensitivity of “the ear.” So if you cannot hear a sound then it is assumed that the sound is insufficient to stimulate the ear. Our present knowledge of the physiology of the ear suggests that this logic is incorrect.

The Ear Is Sensitive to Wind Turbine Infrasond

The sensory cells responsible for hearing are contained in a structure in the cochlea (the auditory portion of the inner ear) called the organ of Corti. This organ runs the entire length of the cochlear spiral and contains two types of sensory cells, which have completely different properties. There is one row

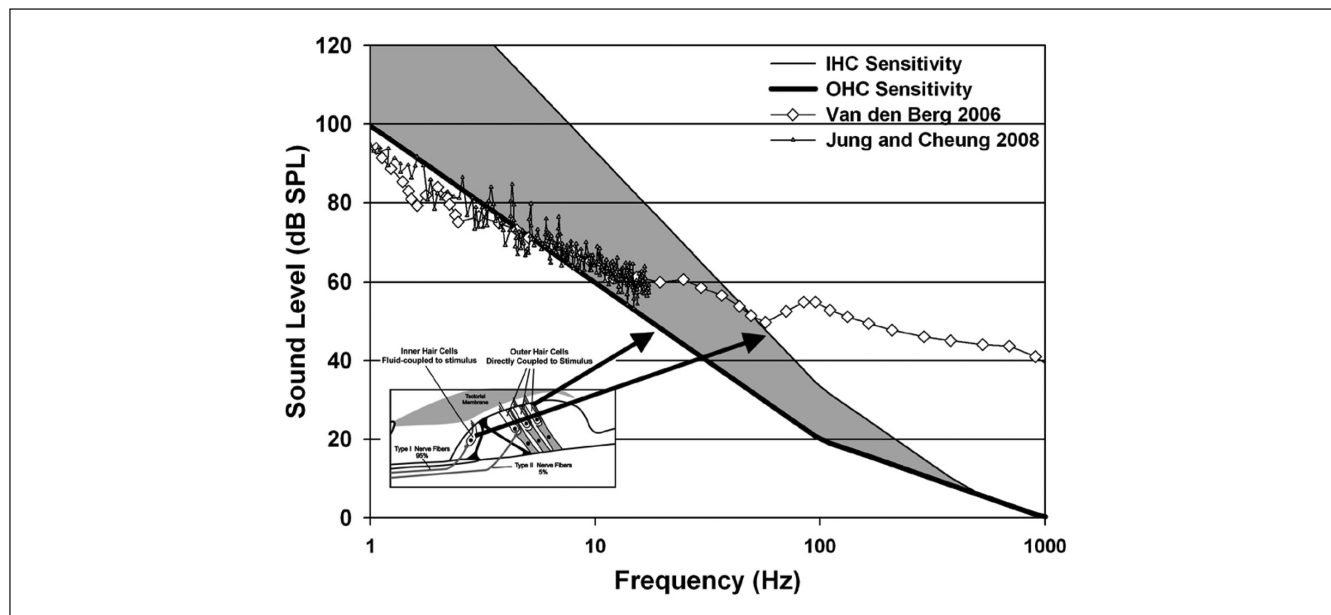


Figure 3. The thin line shows the estimated sensitivity of inner hair cells (IHC) as a function of frequency, which is comparable with the human audibility curve shown in Figure 2 and which is consistent with hearing being mediated by the IHC (based on Cheatham & Dallos, 2001). The thick line shows the estimated sensitivity of the outer hair cells (OHC), which are substantially more sensitive than the IHC. Sound components of the overlaid wind turbine spectra within the shaded region (approximately 5 to 50 Hz) are too low to stimulate the IHC and cannot therefore be heard but are of sufficient level to stimulate the OHC. The inset shows a cross section of the sensory organ of the cochlea (the organ of Corti) showing the locations of the IHC and OHC

of sensory inner hair cells (IHC) and three rows of outer hair cells (OHC) as shown schematically in the inset to Figure 3. For both IHC and OHC, sound-induced deflections of the cell's sensory hairs provide stimulation and elicit electrical responses. Each IHC is innervated by multiple nerve fibers that transmit information to the brain, and it is widely accepted that hearing occurs through the IHC. The rapidly declining sensitivity of hearing at lower frequencies (Figure 2) is accounted for by three processes that selectively reduce low-frequency sensitivity (Cheatham & Dallos, 2001), specifically the properties of middle ear mechanics, from pressure shunting through the cochlear helicotrema and from "fluid coupling" of the inner hair cell stereocilia to the stimulus (reviewed in detail by Salt & Hullar, 2010).

The combined effect of these processes, quantified by Cheatham and Dallos (2001), are shown as the "IHC sensitivity" curve in Figure 3. The last component attenuating low frequencies, the so-called fluid coupling of input, arises because the sensory hairs of the IHC do not contact the overlying gelatinous tectorial membrane but are located in the fluid space below the membrane.

As a result, measurements from the IHC show that they do not respond to sound-induced displacements of the structure but instead their amplitude and phase characteristics are consistent with them responding to the velocity of the stimulus. As stimulus frequency is lowered, the longer cycles result in lower stimulus velocity, so the effective stimulus falls by 6 dB/octave. This accounts for the known insensitivity of the IHC to low-frequency stimuli. For low frequencies, the

calculated sensitivity of IHC (Figure 3) compares well with measures of hearing sensitivity (Figure 2), supporting the view that hearing is mediated by the IHC.

The problem, however, arises from the more numerous OHC of the sensory organ of Corti of the ear. Anatomic studies show that the sensory hairs of the OHC are embedded in the overlying tectorial membrane, and electrical measurements from these cells show their responses depend on the displacement rather than the velocity of the structure. As a result, their responses do not decline to the same degree as IHC as frequency is lowered.

Their calculated sensitivity is shown as the "OHC sensitivity" curve in Figure 3. It is important to note that the difference between IHC and OHC responses has nothing to do with frequency-dependent effects of the middle ear or of the helicotrema (the other two of the three components mentioned above). For example, any attenuation of low-frequency stimuli provided by the helicotrema will equally affect both the IHC and the OHC. So the difference in sensitivity shown in Figure 3 arises purely from the difference in how the sensory hairs of the IHC and OHC are coupled to the overlying tectorial membrane.

The important consequence of this physiological difference between the IHC and the OHC is that the OHC are stimulated at much lower levels than the IHC. In Figure 3, the portion of the wind turbine sound spectrum within the shaded region represents frequencies and levels that are too low to be heard, but which are sufficient to stimulate the OHC of the ear.

This is not confined to infrasonic frequencies (below 20 Hz), but in this example includes sounds over the range from 5 to 50 Hz. It is apparent that the concept that “sounds you can’t hear cannot affect you” cannot be correct because it does not recognize these well-documented physiologic properties of the sensory cells of the inner ear.

Stimulation of OHC at inaudible, low levels can have potentially numerous consequences. In animals, cochlear microphonics demonstrating the responses of the OHC can be recorded to infrasonic frequencies (5 Hz) at levels as low as 40 dB SPL (Salt & Lichtenhan, in press). The OHCs are innervated by Type II nerve fibers that constitute 5% to 10% of the auditory nerve fibers, which connect the hair cells to the brainstem. The other 90% to 95% come from the IHCs. Both Type I (from IHC) and Type II (from OHC) nerve fibers terminate in the cochlear nucleus of the brainstem, but the anatomical connections of the two systems increasingly appear to be quite different. Type I fibers terminate on the main output neurons of the cochlear nucleus. For example, in the dorsal part of the cochlear nucleus, Type I fibers connect with fusiform cells, which directly process information received from the ear and then deliver it to higher levels of the auditory pathway. In contrast, Type II fibers terminate in the granule cell regions of the cochlear nucleus (Brown, Berglund, Kiang, & Ryugo, 1988). Some granule cells receive direct input from Type II fibers (Berglund & Brown, 1994). This is potentially significant because the granule cells provide a major source of input to nearby cells, whose function is inhibitory to the fusiform cells that are processing heard sounds. If Type II fibers excite granule cells, their ultimate effect would be to diminish responses of fusiform cells to sound. Evidence is mounting that loss of or even just overstimulation of OHCs may lead to major disturbances in the balance of excitatory and inhibitory influences in the dorsal cochlear nucleus. One product of this disturbance is the emergence of hyperactivity, which is widely believed to contribute to the perception of phantom sounds or tinnitus (Kaltenbach et al., 2002; Kaltenbach & Godfrey, 2008). The granule cell system also connects to numerous auditory and nonauditory centers of the brain (Shore, 2005). Some of these centers are directly involved in audition, but others serve functions as diverse as attentional control, arousal, startle, the sense of balance, and the monitoring of head and ear position (Godfrey et al., 1997).

Functions that have been attributed to the dorsal cochlear nucleus thus include sound localization, cancellation of self-generated noise, orienting the head and ears to sound sources, and attentional gating (Kaltenbach, 2006; Oertel & Young, 2004). Thus, any input from OHCs to the circuitry of the dorsal cochlear nucleus could influence functions at several levels.

A-Weighted Wind Turbine Sound Measurements

Measurements of sound levels generated by wind turbines presented by the wind industry are almost exclusively A-weighted and expressed as dBA. When measured in this

manner, the sound levels near turbines are typically in the range of 30 to 50 dBA, making wind turbine sounds,

about the same level as noise from a flowing stream about 50-100 meters away or the noise of leaves rustling in a gentle breeze. This is similar to the sound level inside a typical living room with a gas fire switched on, or the reading room of a library or in an unoccupied, quiet, air-conditioned office. (Renewable UK, 2011)

On the basis of such measurements, we would expect wind turbines to be very quiet machines that would be unlikely to disturb anyone to a significant degree. In contrast, the human perception of wind turbine noise is considerably different. Pedersen and Persson-Waye (2004) reported that for many other types of noise (road traffic, aircraft, railway), the level required to cause annoyance in 30% of people was over 70 dBA, whereas wind turbine noise caused annoyance of 30% of people at a far lower level, at around 40 dBA. This major discrepancy is probably a consequence of A-weighting the wind turbine sound measurements, thereby excluding the low-frequency components that contribute to annoyance. A-weighting corrects sound measurements according to human hearing sensitivity (based on the 40 phon sensitivity curve). The result is that low-frequency sound components are dramatically deemphasized in the measurement, based on the rationale that these components are less easily heard by humans. An example showing the effect of A-weighting the turbine sound spectrum data of Van den Berg (2006) is shown in Figure 4. The low-frequency components of the original spectrum, which resulted in a peak level of 93 dB SPL at 1 Hz, are removed by A-weighting, leaving a spectrum with a peak level of 42 dBA near 1 kHz. A-weighting is perfectly acceptable if hearing the sound is the important factor. A problem arises though when A-weighted measurements or spectra are used to assess whether the wind turbine sound affects the ear. We have shown above that some components of the inner ear, specifically the OHC, are far more sensitive to low-frequency sounds than is hearing. Therefore, A-weighted sounds do not give a valid representation of whether wind turbine noise affects the ear or other aspects of human physiology mediated by the OHC and unrelated to hearing. From Figure 3, we know that sound frequencies down to 3 to 4 Hz may be stimulating the OHC, yet the A-weighted spectrum in Figure 4 cuts off all components below approximately 14 Hz. For this reason, the determination of whether wind turbine sounds affect people simply cannot be made based on A-weighted sound measurements. A-weighted measurements are inappropriate for this purpose and give a misleading representation of whether the sound affects the ear.

Alternatives to A-weighting are the use of full-spectrum (unweighted), C-weighted, or G-weighted measurements. G-weighted measurements use a weighting curve based on the human audibility curve below 20 Hz and a steep cutoff above 20 Hz so that the normal audible range of frequencies is deemphasized. Although the shape of this function is arbitrary

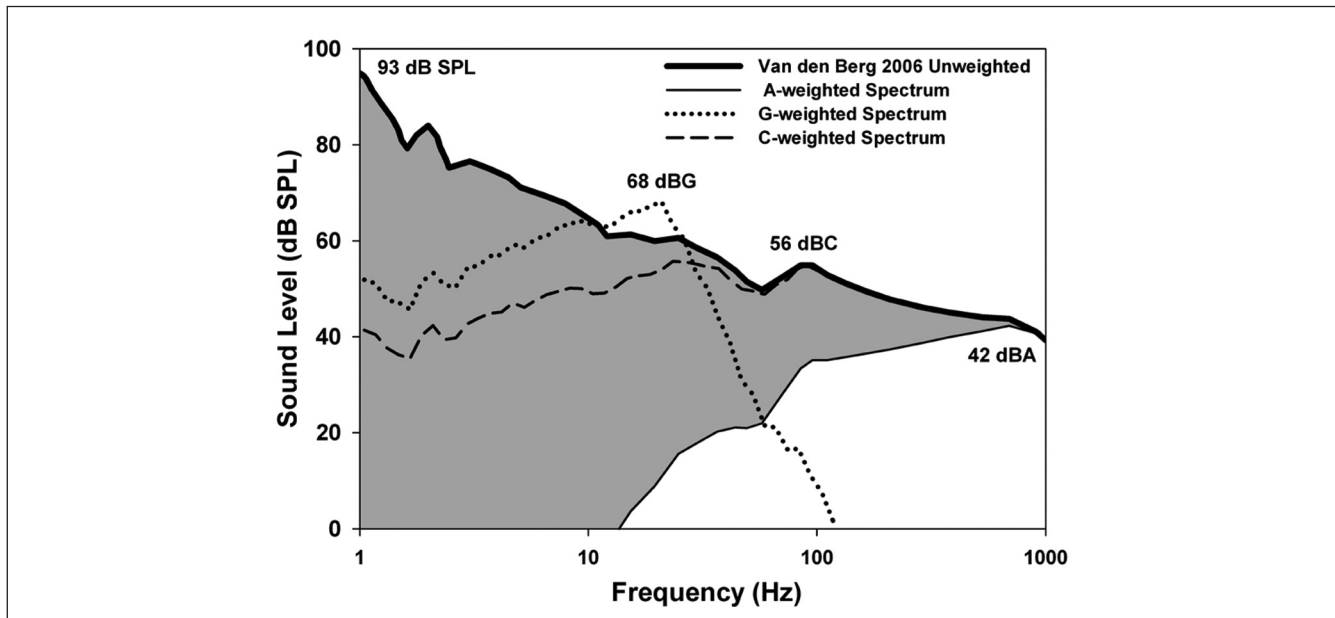


Figure 4. Low-frequency components of wind turbine sound spectrum (below 1 kHz) before and after A-weighting. The original spectrum was taken from Van den Berg (2006). The shaded area represents the degree of alteration of the spectrum by A-weighting. A weighting (i.e., adjusting the spectrum according to the sensitivity of human hearing) has the effect of ignoring the fact that low-frequency sounds can stimulate the OHC at levels that are not heard. Representing this sound as 42 dBA, based on the peak of the spectrum, ignores the possibility that low-frequency components down to frequencies as low as 5 Hz (from Figure 3) are stimulating the OHC. Also shown are the spectra after G-weighting (dotted) and C-weighting (dashed) for comparison

when hearing is not the primary issue, it does give a measure of the infrasound content of the sound that is independent of higher frequency, audible components, as shown in Figure 4. By applying the function to the normal human hearing sensitivity curve, it can be shown that sounds of approximately 95 dBG will be heard by humans, which agrees with observations by Van den Berg (2006). Similarly, by G-weighting the OHC sensitivity function in Figure 3, it can be estimated that sound levels of 60 dBG will stimulate the OHC of the human ear. In a survey of infrasound levels produced by wind turbines measured in dBG (Jakobsen, 2005), upwind turbines typically generated infrasound of 60 to 70 dBG, although levels above and below this range were observed in this and other studies. From Jakobsen's G-weighted measurements, we conclude that the level of infrasound produced by wind turbines is of too low a level to be heard, but in most cases is sufficient to cause stimulation of the OHC of the human ear. C-weighting also provides more representation of low-frequency sound components but still arbitrarily de-emphasizes infrasound components.

Is the Infrasound From Wind Turbines Harmful to Humans Living Nearby?

Our present understanding of inner ear physiology and of the nature of wind turbine sounds demonstrates that low-level

infrasound produced by wind turbines is transduced by the OHC of the ear and this information is transmitted to the cochlear nucleus of the brain via Type II afferent fibers. We therefore conclude that dismissive statements such as "there is no significant infrasound from current designs of wind turbines" are undoubtedly false. The fact that infrasound-dependent information, at levels that are not consciously heard, is present at the level of the brainstem provides a scientific basis for the possibility that such sounds can have influence on people. The possibility that low-frequency components of the sound could contribute both to high annoyance levels and possibly to other problems that people report as a result of exposure to wind turbine noise cannot therefore be dismissed out of hand.

Nevertheless, the issue of whether wind turbine sounds can cause harm is more complex. In contrast to other sounds, such as loud sounds, which are harmful and damage the internal structure of the inner ear, there is no evidence that low-level infrasound causes this type of direct damage to the ear. So infrasound from wind turbines is unlikely to be harmful in the same way as high-level audible sounds.

The critical issue is that if the sound is detected, then can it have other detrimental effects on a person to a degree that constitutes harm? A major complicating factor in considering this issue is the typical exposure duration. Individuals living near wind turbines may be exposed to the turbine's sounds for prolonged periods, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for weeks, possibly extending to years,

although the sound level will vary over time with varying wind conditions. Although there have been many studies of infrasound on humans, these have typically involved higher levels for limited periods (typically of up to 24 hours). In a search of the literature, no studies were found that have come close to replicating the long-term exposures to low-level infrasound experienced by those living near wind turbines. So, to date, there are no published studies showing that such prolonged exposures do not harm humans. On the other hand, there are now numerous reports (e.g., Pierpont, 2009; Punch, James, & Pabst, 2010), discussed extensively in this journal, that are highly suggestive that individuals living near wind turbines are made ill, with a plethora of symptoms that commonly include chronic sleep disturbance. The fact that such reports are being dismissed on the grounds that the level of infrasound produced by wind turbines is at too low a level to be heard appears to totally ignore the known physiology of the ear. Pathways from the OHC to the brain exist by which infrasound that cannot be heard could influence function. So, in contrast, from our perspective, there is ample evidence to support the view that infrasound could affect people, and which justifies the need for more detailed scientific studies of the problem. Thus, it is possible that people's health could suffer when turbines are placed too close to their homes and this becomes more probable if sleep is disturbed by the infrasound. Understanding these phenomena may be important to deal with other sources of low-frequency noise and may establish why some individuals are more sensitive than others. A better understanding may also allow effective procedures to be implemented to mitigate the problem.

We can conclude that based on well-documented knowledge of the physiology of the ear and its connections to the brain, it is scientifically possible that infrasound from wind turbines could affect people living nearby.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Bios

Alec N. Salt received his PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK, in 1977 and has been actively involved in research into the physiology of the ear for over 35 years.

James A. Kaltenbach received his PhD from the University of Pennsylvania in 1984. He specializes in the neurobiology of hearing disorders and is currently the Director of Otology Research at the Cleveland Clinic.