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Noise annoys: Hongkongers driven to distraction by daily din which experts say is making the city sick

From the constant racket of construction to rowdy neighbours, noise pollution is a major problem in densely populated Hong Kong

In the past year, more than a million people have been left 'distressed' by flat renovations alone, say experts

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Kristen Fay feels anxious from the time she wakes up to the time she goes to bed. The source of her frayed state is noisy neighbours.

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“There’s loud scraping of furniture and stomping with high heels the noise is constant,” said Fay, who lives in the Central district of Hong Kong with her husband and one-year-old son.

“On top of that there’s vacuuming at 1am and piano playing about five times a day.”

To help block out the racket, South African-born Fay, who works from home, wears ear plugs. Installing ceiling insulation is the next step.

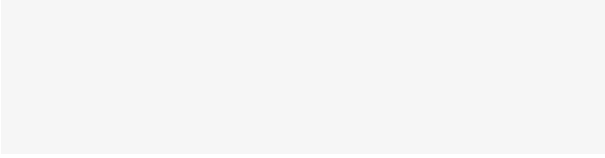
“We can’t move because we broke our lease for our previous flat and lost our two-month deposit to move here, so it is just too expensive to keep moving,” she said.



Roadworks across Hong Kong's constantly changing cityscape are a prime source of noise pollution.
Photo: Getty Images

Loud neighbours and renovation noise were the reasons for the family's previous relocation.

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Hongkonger Carrie Tsang moved into a flat last year with her husband and three children under the age of five. She was told the renovations would last one month.

However, the banging and drilling dragged on for more than half a year until they decided enough was enough.

“We couldn’t stay in the flat during the day, which meant the kids’ naps were disrupted,” said Tsang. “They were so agitated and always crying. We had to move.”



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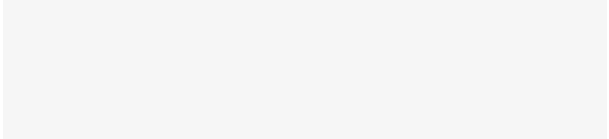
Noise pollution is a major problem in densely populated Hong Kong. If it is not construction noise – rock hammers and drills – then multi-storey living brings its own cacophony of annoying sounds, including neighbours who see themselves as aspiring drummers, pianists, soccer players or ballroom dancers.



Even leisure time can be filled with stress. One example being the city's busy dim sum restaurants. Photo: SCMP

The problem is widespread. In the past year, there were more than a million people “distressed” by flat renovations alone, according to the transport publication, TransitJam. Of that number, only about 8 per cent made formal complaints.

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Noise is a common complaint among urban dwellers and can take a heavy toll on mental health, said Hong Kong clinical psychologist Quratulain Zaidi.

“Research shows that exposure to constant or high levels of noise can cause countless adverse health effects including stress-related illnesses, high blood pressure, speech interference, hearing loss, sleep disruption and lost productivity,” said Zaidi.

“The brain is always monitoring sounds for signs of danger, even during sleep. As a result, frequent or loud noise can trigger anxiety or stress,” she said.



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“With continued exposure to noise pollution, a person’s sensitivity to stress increases.”

Those living with noise pollution can feel irritable, on edge, frustrated, or angry, she added.



The clack-clack sound of mahjong tiles may sound innocent but it can lead to untold irritation. Photo: Shutterstock

“In severe cases, loud sounds can directly cause hearing impairment including tinnitus – persistent high-pitched ringing in the ears – and paracusis, or distorted hearing.”

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