

Noise At Work

Introduction:

Noise is part of everyday life, but too much noise can cause permanent and disabling hearing damage. This can be hearing loss that gets worse over time, damage caused by sudden, extremely loud noises, or tinnitus (permanent ringing in the ears). Noise is measured in decibels (dB). An 'A-weighting' sometimes written as 'dB(A)', is used to measure average noise levels, and a 'C-weighting' or 'dB(C)', to measure peak, impact or explosive noises.

Knowledge Check:

Did you know that every increase of 3 dB doubles the noise, so what might seem like small differences in the numbers can be quite significant.

What are the legal exposure limits for noise in the workplace?

The Noise Regulations define 'exposure action values' – levels of noise exposure which, if exceeded, require you to take specific action. There are 'lower' and 'upper' action values.

Lower : 80db. Upper : 85db. Exposure limit: 87db.



Statistics & Effects

- The HSE estimate that around 2 million people are exposed to noise at work, at such levels it is deemed potentially harmful.
- Around 1.1 million people rely on PPE to prevent harm.
- Around 500,000 have hearing loss due to noise at work⁷

What are the effects of losing your hearing? How could this impact your day to day life?

- Tinnitus
- Localisation of sounds— Issues identifying where the sound is coming from.
- Safety risks— Inability to hear warning and general communications.

Early Warning Signs

If sounds seem muffled or softer after noise exposure, your hearing is affected by a temporary threshold shift, which warns that your ears have been over exposed. If you repeatedly expose your ears without protection, the shift can worsen and become permanent, resulting in untreatable damage to your hearing ability.

Another warning sign is tinnitus – a ringing, whistling or buzzing in your head. It is a sign that the hair cells in the inner ear have been overworked and irritated by the high levels of noise. Tinnitus is especially noticeable in a quiet situation such as trying to sleep at night. If you need to go where noise levels are high, wear earplugs or ear protectors - there's nothing macho about losing your hearing.

Use ear protectors in the right way, making sure that:

- You wear ear protectors wherever there is loud noise
- You don't remove your ear protectors, even for a short time, when it is noisy
- Seals fit tightly round the ear
- Long hair or clothing does not get caught
- Seals and foam inside ear protectors are kept clean
- You use ear plugs if you wear glasses, as spectacle frames make the seals on ear protectors leak
- Ensure ear plugs are clean and put into the ear properly
- Ensure all ear protectors are stored correctly when not in use

When To Use Hearing Protection

When should you use hearing protection?

According to the HSE, Hearing protection should be issued to employees:

- Where extra protection is needed above what has been achieved using noise control;
- As a short-term measure while other methods of controlling noise are being developed.

You should not use hearing protection as an alternative to controlling noise by technical and organisational means.

So how do you know when loud is too loud?

Active monitoring of individual tasks, sound levels can be taken at point of source, as well as at intervals away from the source, to identify if levels are too high, particularly if others are working within the vicinity.

What Does The Law Require?

Employers are required to:

- Provide their employees with hearing protectors if they ask for it and their noise exposure is between the lower and upper exposure action values.
- Provide employees with hearing protectors and make sure they use them properly when their noise exposure exceeds the upper exposure action values.
- Identify hearing protection zones, ie areas where the use of hearing protection is compulsory, and mark them with signs.
- Provide your employees with training and information on how to use and care for the hearing protectors to ensure that the hearing protectors are properly used and maintained.

What Do You Have To Do As An Employee?

Give a moment to discuss the employee requirements.

The HSE State that:

- **Co-operate:** Help your employer to do what is needed to protect your hearing. Make sure you use properly any noise-control devices (eg noise enclosures), and follow any working methods that are put in place.
- **Wear any hearing protection you are given:** Wear it properly (you should be trained how to do this), and make sure you wear it all the time when you are doing noisy work, and when you are in hearing protection zones. Taking it off even for a short while really reduces the overall protection you get, meaning your hearing could still be damaged.
- **Look after your hearing protection:** Your employer should tell you how to look after it and where you can get it from. Make sure you understand what you need to do.
- **Attend for your hearing checks:** It is in your interest that any signs of damage to your hearing are detected as soon as possible, and certainly before the damage becomes disabling.
- **Report any problems:** Report any problems with noise-control devices or your hearing protection straight away. Let your employer and any workplace representative know.

Note: all of the above are legal duties on you.

Hearing Protection

Hearing protection such as earmuffs and earplugs are your last line of defence against damage. Your employer should provide it, and train you how to use it and how to get replacements. There are many different types and designs available, and your employer should consult you and offer a choice.

Don't ignore the early warning signs! If you think you may have a problem report it to your supervisor or line manager.

Register

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