

NOISE

Most workers take good hearing for granted. Hearing loss can happen so gradually that it can go unnoticed until it's too late. Then, even a hearing aid may not help. Some assume hearing loss is the unavoidable result of getting older, yet most hearing loss is due to noise over a lifetime. While loss of hearing may result from a single exposure to a noise or explosion, such traumatic losses are rare. Most cases of hearing loss begin gradually in frequencies slightly above that of human speech and then subtly spread to lower and higher frequencies. Hearing loss can disrupt job performance, cause stress-related problems, increased heart rate, fatigue, irritability, tension and lead to unnecessary accidents or injuries on the job.

The workplace can be very noisy. Both the amount of noise and the duration of exposure determine the ability to damage hearing. Workers may be exposed to noise from many sources: equipment, vehicles, or tools, to name a few. Any of these things can damage hearing when exposure accumulates over extended periods of time.

How can you tell if work is too loud and may be causing hearing damage?

- You have to raise your voice to be heard.
- You can't hear someone less than two feet away without shouting.
- Speech around you sounds muffled or dull after you leave a noisy area.
- You have ringing in your ears after exposure to noise.

What can employers do to prevent their workers from developing hearing problems?

Good planning can prevent problems caused by excessive noise exposure. Noise reduced at its source should be the first consideration. Employers should invest in noise-controlled equipment. When purchasing, employers can ask vendors if there is a "quiet" model or a noise-reducing option, such as enclosed or acoustically lined vehicular cabs and equipment.

Work schedules can be adjusted so that exposure to high noise levels does not occur for the entire work day. This allows a noise recovery period to be part of the work shift. Equally important is the use of personal protection devices, such as ear plugs and ear muffs. Employers should provide training on the protection devices available and the effects of noise on hearing if workers do not use the protection.

Training should include the fit, use, and care of any hearing protection device.

Employers can't always prevent noise, but they can lessen the chance of workers experiencing hearing loss by having them follow established safety procedures and enforcing the use of proper hearing protection. Don't risk losing a worker's hearing on the job. Silence may be a great thing, but not when it's permanent.

