

Noise in the Workplace: Employee Factsheet

What is workplace noise?

Noise is part of everyday life, but loud noise can permanently damage hearing. Noise-induced hearing loss is the most common preventable occupational health hazard. There is no satisfactory treatment for noise-induced hearing loss and although generally hearing loss is gradual, when you're deaf, you stay deaf.

Over 1 million employees in the UK are exposed to levels of noise that could put their hearing at risk and 17% suffer deafness, tinnitus or other ear conditions as a result of exposure to excessive noise. Instant damage can be caused from very loud or explosive noises. Symptoms and early signs of hearing loss are: conversation becoming difficult or impossible; trouble using the telephone; difficulty in catching 't', 'd' and 's' sounds; permanent tinnitus.

Controlling risk

- Co-operate. Help your employer to do what is needed to protect your hearing. Make sure you use any noise control devices (e.g. noise enclosures) properly. Attend hearing checks. This means you need to take some responsibility for your hearing. Look out for noise hazard signs on site and obey them.
- Do not keep machinery running unnecessarily. Ensure you don't expose your workmates to your noise. Move the noise source away from the work area or move the work area away from the noise. If possible, shield the noise process by working behind a wall or some other sound- absorbing material.
- Wear any hearing protection you are given. Wear it properly (you should be trained how to do this), and make sure you wear it at all times when you are carrying out noisy work or are in hearing protection areas. Taking it off even for a short while means that your hearing could still be damaged. Remember that there is no cure for deafness.
- Look after your hearing protection equipment. Your employer should tell you how to look after it and where you can get it from.
- Report any problems with your hearing protection or noise control devices straight away to your employer or safety representative. If you have any ear trouble, let your employer know.

Noisy industries:

- construction
- aircraft operations and airports
- demolition or road repair
- woodworking
- engineering
- textile manufacture
- forging, pressing or stamping
- paper or board making
- canning or bottling
- foundries.

Who can help?

- Your employer has a legal duty to protect you and should be working on measures to reduce the risk of hearing damage. The law says that your employer has to find out what levels of noise you are exposed to and assess the risk to your hearing.
- Trade-union-appointed safety representatives or elected representatives of employee safety can be very useful in communicating problems, inspecting documents and consulting employers over measures to meet the Noise Regulations.
- The company doctor, occupational health nurse or your GP will also be able to help. The company doctor will normally be an occupational health professional where there is a company occupational health scheme and may be supported by specially trained occupational health nurses who have training on matters such as hearing assessments and noise control. If you do not have access to a Company occupational health service you can obtain assistance through your own GP or through the NHS.

What are the limits?

They are based around the concept of 'Action Values' - the level of noise exposure at which action must be taken to reduce the harmful effects to those who would be exposed to the noise.

The first action value is set at 80dB(A) (decibels) averaged over an 8 hour day or, if your work varies from day to day, averaged over a week. At this level, an employer must provide information and training to employees on the health implications associated with noise. They must also make hearing protection equipment available.

The second action value is set at 85dB(A) again averaged over a day or week. Above this level, an employer must do all that is reasonably practicable to reduce noise levels, using whatever control measures are available. Until effective controls can be implemented, use of hearing protection is mandatory. Each affected area where noise exposure is likely to exceed this action value must be declared a mandatory hearing protection zone with appropriate signs put up.

Where there is likely to be a risk to the health of employees from noise then your employer is required to introduce health surveillance including hearing tests. There are other action values and peak values for very loud or impulsive sounds like a loud bang where the noise does not necessarily continue or an extreme noise such as that which may arise from being close to an aircraft engine.

Typical noise levels

- a normal conversation: 50–60dB(A)
- a busy high street: 78–85dB(A)
- a chainsaw: 115–120dB(A).

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