



Noise in the workplace





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Introduction

Noise is unwanted sound. One person's music is another person's noise. Sound generated in a working environment that has the potential to cause damage to hearing is noise.

Damage to hearing, or occupational deafness arising from exposure to high levels of workplace noise, is normally gradual in its onset. The true cause can be obscured by being mistaken for deafness caused by age, disease or exposure to other sources of noise such as loud music, shooting or motorcycle sports.

However, as most occupational deafness is due to prolonged exposure to high levels of workplace noise, the exposure time, noise frequency and intensity are important factors in its prevention.



Risk identification

Your risk assessments require that you identify all the significant hazards and assess the risks associated with activities in your workplace. It has been recognised for some time that exposure to high noise levels over long periods is a hazard, which can result in hearing damage.

Here is a guide to help you understand if you have a noise problem. If you have to shout to hold a conversation in the workplace, or have difficulty being heard clearly by someone about 2 metres away, then it is highly likely that the noise levels being generated are sufficiently high to cause hearing damage.

A high level of impulse noise is more damaging (impulse noise is loud and of short duration) to hearing than a steady daily exposure. Impulse noise is more likely to be experienced in environments such as call centres or where digital telephony equipment is in use.

The Control of Noise Regulations requires that adequate noise assessments be made where employees are likely to be exposed to:

- Levels of noise, averaged over a working day or week, which exceed the permitted values; and
- Maximum levels of noise (peak sound pressure) which exceed the permitted values in a working day.

The values are:

- Lower exposure action values:
 - » Daily or weekly exposure of 80 dB
 - » Peak sound pressure of 135 dB
- Upper exposure action values:
 - » Daily or weekly exposure of 85 dB
 - » Peak sound pressure of 137dB

The actions you need to take are described in the rest of this leaflet.

There are also levels of noise exposure which must not be exceeded:

- Exposure limit values:
 - » Daily or weekly exposure of 87 dB
 - » Peak sound pressure of 140 dB

These exposure limit values take into account any reduction in exposure provided by hearing protection.

To ensure that such assessments can be considered adequate, they should:

- Identify who is exposed to high noise levels
- Provide such information for employees
- Review noise levels where a significant change in work activities has occurred
- Be recorded and kept until a reassessment is made.

Source: HSE



Hierarchy of control

Once you've carried out your noise assessments, a hierarchy of control measures should be adopted as follows:

- Reduce your employees' exposure to noise as far as is reasonably practical, other than by the use of hearing protectors
- Adequately assess all daily noise exposure, where it is likely to exceed 85dB(A).



Hearing protection zones

If – after implementing all reasonably practical steps to reduce noise – the exposure levels remain above 85db(A), you must ensure the work areas involved are designated hearing protection zones:

- Install signs to show clearly where the zones are
- Provide suitable hearing protection
- Enforce the wearing of hearing protection by everyone who enters the zones
- Record all information, instruction and training given to employees
- Record the issue of all hearing protection issued to employees
- Monitor the compliance levels with the noise policy and ensure it is working properly.



Competence

All noise assessments should be undertaken by a competent person who has the appropriate knowledge, experience and skill. In some cases this will require additional training so they can meet the objective of the legislation. They are then able to measure noise, identify all the workers likely to be exposed and provide enough information to enable the appropriate action to be taken.

In all but the simplest cases, noise assessments will require specialist help which is unlikely to be available in-house and therefore should be sought externally.

Further information is available from:

- <http://www.hse.gov.uk/noise/index.htm>
- <http://www.ioa.org.uk/>
- <http://www.association-of-noise-consultants.co.uk/>



AXA Insurance

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