

Protect your hearing or lose it!



What is the problem with noise?

Noise is part of everyday life, but loud noise can permanently damage your hearing. Conversation becomes difficult or impossible, your family complains about the television being too loud and you have trouble using the telephone.

Permanent tinnitus (ringing in the ears) can also be caused. The damage can be instant, for very loud or explosive noises, but generally it is gradual. By the time you notice it, it is probably too late.

Is there a noise problem where I work?

Probably, if you can answer 'yes' to any of these questions about the noise where you work:

- Is the noise intrusive – like a busy street, a vacuum cleaner or a crowded restaurant – for most of the working day?

- Do you have to raise your voice to have a normal conversation when about 2 m apart for at least part of the day?
- Do you use noisy powered tools or machinery for over half an hour a day?
- Do you work in a noisy industry, eg construction, demolition or road repair; woodworking; plastics processing; engineering; textile manufacture; general fabrication; forging, pressing or stamping; paper or board making; canning or bottling; foundries?
- Are there noises because of impacts (eg hammering, drop forging, pneumatic impact tools etc), explosive sources such as cartridge-operated tools or detonators, or guns?

You are also at risk if you have muffled hearing at the end of the day, even if it is better by the next morning. However, there is no need for your hearing to be damaged at all – your employer has a duty to protect you and should be working on measures to reduce the risk.

What does my employer have to do?

The law says your employer has to:

- find out what levels of noise you are exposed to and assess the risk to your hearing.

Depending on the levels of noise exposure, your employer must:

- control the noise exposure by ‘engineering’ it out, eg by putting in screens or barriers, or fitting a silencer;
- change the way you work or the layout of the workplace – not just rely on hearing protectors;
- provide the quietest machinery that will do the job;
- give you hearing protection (a selection, so you can choose a type that suits you);
- send you for regular hearing checks;
- provide you with training and information;
- consult you and your representatives.

What do I have to do?

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 areas. Taking it off even for a short while means that 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.

Report any problems. Report any problems with your hearing protection or noise control devices straight away. Let your employer or safety representative know. If you have any ear trouble, let your employer know.

What do I have to look out for?

Hearing protection such as earmuffs and earplugs is your last line of defence against damage, so check the following:

Earmuffs Make sure they totally cover your ears, fit tightly and there are no gaps around the seals. Don't let hair, jewellery, glasses, hats etc interfere with the seal. Try and keep the seals and the insides clean. Don't stretch the headband too much – make sure it keeps its tension.

Earplugs They can be difficult to fit properly – practise fitting them and get help if you are having trouble. Often they can look like they are fitted properly, but they may not be giving you much protection. Clean your hands before you fit earplugs, and don't share them. Some types you use only once, others can be re-used and even washed – make sure you know which type you have.

Semi-inserts/caps Follow the same advice as for earplugs and make sure any headband keeps its tension.



This sign indicates an area where you must wear hearing protection.

For more information on noise, see HSE's free leaflet *Noise at work* INDG362(rev1) and visit HSE's noise website at www.hse.gov.uk/noise.

For information about health and safety ring HSE's Infoline
Tel: 0845 345 0055 Fax: 0845 408 9566 Textphone:
0845 408 9577 e-mail: hse.infoline@natbrit.com or write to
HSE Information Services, Caerphilly Business Park,
Caerphilly CF83 3GG, or visit the HSE website:
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First published 10/05. Please acknowledge the source as HSE.