



## Occupational Hearing Loss

Occupational noise-induced hearing loss is the third leading major public health issue, affecting 48 million Americans, or 20% of the adult population. Arthritis leads the way, followed by heart disease. 60% of people with hearing loss are either in the workforce or in educational settings. So why isn't hearing protection a "no-brainer?"

Studies show that hearing protection often isn't worn for a few different reasons:

- 1) **A gradual, painless process:** Noise-induced hearing loss is generally a gradual, invisible, and painless process, so many workers don't consider it a hazard—until it's too late. Repeated exposure to loud sounds over time, like machinery at work, has the potential to cause complete hearing loss. Very loud sounds (typically those louder than 85 dB), can be more common than people might think. At a minimum, prolonged exposure to these high-level sounds can cause ringing in the ears and more seriously, even permanent damage.
- 2) **Discomfort and poor fit:** The second reason hearing protection isn't worn often enough is the discomfort and poor fit of the protection product. Many workers find earplugs difficult to insert and keep in the ear, and many find earmuffs too bulky, tight, hot, and uncomfortable. This problem really justifies the importance of "fitting" hearing protection to the given worker (and documenting what works for them). By having an employee demonstrate their ability to properly insert an earplug and documenting it, this leaves no excuse for that employee not to be using the product.

3) Compliance monitoring is hard: When earplugs are inserted properly into the ear canal, it can sometimes be difficult for management to observe if their workers are even wearing the protection! In a work environment where only earplugs are offered, some workers simply don't worry about getting caught and, worse yet, management does not have firm enough consequences for non-compliance with the hearing protection policy. Workers compensation claims in this category can be very expensive and you certainly do not want OSHA coming down hard for lack of compliance.

There are many potentially serious effects of ignoring hearing protection. Our Safety Services Team can help you develop an effective hearing conservation program, perform sound level analysis, and conduct training. We can help take the burden off this process.

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