



Hearing Loss is the Third Most Common Chronic Physical Condition Among Adults

According to the CDC, the Occupational Hearing Loss Surveillance Project found hearing loss to be the third most common chronic physical condition among adults and occupational hearing loss is the most common work-related illness in the nation. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) estimates that 22 million workers in the U.S. are exposed to hazardous occupational noise. The good news is it can be prevented, both on and off the job, with hearing protection.

We might expect workers in some types of industry to be at a higher risk than others for developing hearing loss. That is exactly what the recently published CDC Occupational Hearing Loss Surveillance Project found. The study, the first to estimate the prevalence of hearing loss by industry sector, focused on noise-exposed workers in the U.S. from 2003 to 2012.

To do so, researchers compared the prevalence of hearing loss within nine U.S. industry sectors from more than 1.4 million worker audiograms. The audiograms came from workers who were exposed to high noise levels, defined as greater than 85 decibels on the A-scale.

The study found a prevalence of 13% hearing loss (from mild to complete) among the study population. In terms of the industry sectors studied, mining (17%), construction (16%), and manufacturing (14%) industries showed the highest prevalence of workers with any hearing impairment or moderate to severe hearing impairment. Within manufacturing sub-sectors that include wood

product, apparel, and machinery manufacturing, workers have occupational hearing loss risks as high as those in mining and construction. In comparison, the public safety sector, which includes police officers and firefighters, showed the lowest prevalence of workers with any hearing loss (7%).

OSHA's current Permissible Exposure Level (PEL) is 90 dBa and Action Level is 85 dBa. This is the level of noise averaged over the entire shift. Many employers establish their Hearing Conservation programs based on these levels, but do not realize that these acceptable levels drop if you work shifts longer than 8 hours. Hearing protection works only if selected and used properly.

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