

What is occupational noise exposure?

Noise, or unwanted sound, is one of the most pervasive occupational health problems. It is a by-product of many industrial processes. Sound consists of pressure changes in a medium (usually air), caused by vibration or turbulence. These pressure changes produce waves emanating away from the turbulent or vibrating source. Exposure to high levels of noise causes hearing loss and may cause other harmful health effects as well. The extent of damage depends primarily on the intensity of the noise and the duration of the exposure.

Noise-induced hearing loss can be temporary or permanent. Temporary hearing loss results from short-term exposures to noise, with normal hearing returning after period of rest. Generally, prolonged exposure to high noise levels over a period of time gradually causes permanent damage.

OSHA's hearing conservation program is designed to protect workers with significant occupational noise exposures from hearing impairment even if they are subject to such noise exposures over their entire working lifetimes. This publication summarizes the required component of OSHA's hearing conservation program for general industry. It covers monitoring, audiometric testing, hearing protectors, training, and recordkeeping requirements.

What monitoring is required?

The hearing conservation program requires employers to monitor noise exposure levels in a way that accurately identifies employees exposed to noise at or above 85 decibels (dB) averaged over 8 working hours, or an 8-hour time-weighted average (TWA). Employers must monitor all employees whose noise exposure is equivalent to or greater than a noise exposure received in 8 hours where the noise level is constantly 85 dB. The exposure measurement must include all continuous, intermittent, and impulsive noise within an 80 dB to 130 dB range and must be taken during a typical work situation. This requirement is performance-oriented because it allows employers to choose the monitoring method that best suits each individual situation.

What is audiometric testing?

Audiometric testing monitors an employee's hearing over time. It also provides an opportunity for employers to educate employees about their hearing and the need to protect it. The employer must establish and maintain an audiometric testing program. The important elements of the program include baseline audiograms, annual audiograms, training, and follow-up procedures. Employers must make audiometric testing available at no cost to all employees who are exposed to an action level of 85 dB or above, measured as an 8-hour TWA. The audiometric testing program follow-up should indicate whether the employer's hearing conservation program is preventing hearing loss. A licensed or certified audiologist, otolaryngologist, or other physician must be responsible for the program. Both professionals and trained technicians may conduct audiometric testing. The professional in charge of the program does not have to be present when a qualified technician conducts tests. The professional's responsibilities include overseeing the program and the work of the technicians, reviewing problem audiograms, and determining whether referral is necessary. The employee needs a referral for further testing when test results are questionable or when related medical problems are suspected. If additional testing is necessary or if the employer suspects a medical pathology of the ear that is caused or aggravated by wearing hearing protectors, the employer must refer the employee for a clinical audiological evaluation or otological exam, as appropriate. There are two types of audiograms required in the hearing conservation program: baseline and annual audiograms.

What is a baseline audiogram?

The baseline audiogram is the reference audiogram against which future audiograms are compared. Employers must provide baseline audiograms within 6 months of an employee's first exposure at or above an 8-hour TWA of 85 dB. An exception is allowed when the employer uses a mobile test van for audiograms. In these instances, baseline audiograms must be completed within 1 year after an employee's first exposure to workplace noise at or above a TWA of 85 dB. Employees, however, must be fitted with, issued, and required to wear hearing protectors

whenever they are exposed to noise levels above a TWA of 85 dB for any period exceeding 6 months after their first exposure until the baseline audiogram is conducted.

What are annual audiograms?

Employers must provide annual audiograms within 1 year of the baseline. It is important to test workers' hearing annually to identify deterioration in their hearing ability as early as possible. This enables employers to initiate protective follow-up measures before hearing loss progresses. Employers must compare annual audiograms to baseline audiograms to determine whether the audiogram is valid and whether the employee has lost hearing ability or experienced a standard threshold shift (STS). An STS is an average shift in either ear of 10 dB or more at 2,000, 3,000, and 4,000 hertz.

When is an employer required to provide hearing protectors?

Employers must provide hearing protectors to all workers exposed to 8-hour TWA noise levels of 85 dB or above. This requirement ensures that employees have access to protectors before they experience any hearing loss. Employees must wear hearing protectors:

- For any period exceeding 6 months from the time they are first exposed to 8-hour TWA noise levels of 85 dB or above, until they receive their baseline audiograms if these tests are delayed due to mobile test van scheduling;
- If they have incurred standard threshold shifts that demonstrate they are susceptible to noise; and
- If they are exposed to noise over the permissible exposure limit of 90 dB over an 8-hour TWA.

Employers must provide employees with a selection of at least one variety of hearing plug and one variety of hearing muff. Employees should decide, with the help of a person trained to fit hearing protectors, which size and type protector is most suitable for the working environment. The protector selected should be comfortable to wear and offer sufficient protection to prevent hearing loss. Hearing protectors must adequately reduce the noise level for each employee's work environment. Most employers use the Noise Reduction Rating (NRR) that represents the protector's ability to reduce noise under ideal laboratory conditions. The employer then adjusts the NRR to reflect noise reduction in the actual working environment. The employer must reevaluate the suitability of the employee's hearing protector whenever a change in working conditions may make it inadequate. If workplace noise levels increase, employees must give employees more effective protectors. The protector must reduce employee exposures to at least 90 dB and to 85 dB when an STS already has occurred in the worker's hearing. Employers must show employees how to use and care for their protectors and supervise them on the job to ensure that they continue to wear them correctly.

What training is required?

Employee training is very important. Workers who understand the reasons for the hearing conservation programs and the need to protect their hearing will be more motivated to wear their protectors and take audiometric tests. Employers must train employees exposed to TWAs of 85 Db and above at least annually in the effects of noise; the purpose, advantages, and disadvantages of various types of hearing protectors; the selection, fit, and care of protectors; and the purpose and procedures of audiometric testing. The training program may be structured in any format, with different portions conducted by different individuals and at different times, as long as the required topics are covered.