



Noise at Work

Noise is unwanted or unpleasant sound. Exposure to high levels of noise can cause incurable hearing damage. The effect that noise has depends upon the noise level (measured in decibel units as dB(A)) and the length of time people are exposed to this noise. Although damage most commonly occurs due to exposure over a period of time, a single loud noise can also cause instantaneous harm.

Noisy machinery includes compressed air tools, generators, printers, power presses etc. If noise is a problem in your workplace then the simple, but essential steps given below should help you to reduce the levels to which your staff are exposed. You may find them useful as a safety check list.

STEP 1 Decide if there is a noise problem. If people have to shout to be heard when standing less than 2 metres away, then you will need to have the noise levels assessed by a competent person and keep a record of the results.

STEP 2 If this assessment shows that any employee is exposed to a daily noise dose exceeding 90 dB(A), or if peak exposure exceeds 140dB(A) for any length of time then you must take measures to reduce exposure to this noise to the lowest possible level by:-

- (a) reducing the noise which is produced, e.g. by:
- maintaining and lubricating equipment
 - placing heavy machinery on rubber mountings
 - replacing worn or loose machine parts
 - changing to a different type of machine
 - using large slow speed fans instead of noisier small fans.
- (b) reducing the length of time for which the machines may operate or the length of time each worker spends in a high noise area.
- (c) placing the noisy machinery or operations in a separate or enclosed area or providing a barrier between the worker and the process.
- (d) using sound absorbing materials, e.g. acoustic tiles on floors, ceilings and walls.

STEP 3 If the above measures are not possible or do not reduce noise levels sufficiently (i.e. to below 85dB(A)) you should provide ear protection for all employees exposed. This equipment should be carefully selected and be suitable for the particular type of noise in question. Ear protectors should also be properly maintained in good condition.

STEP 4 Provide all staff affected by noise with adequate information and training about the risks to hearing and what they can do to minimise risk e.g. wearing ear protectors.

STEP 5 Monitor the situation in the workplace regularly to ensure that the control measures remain effective.

STEP 6 Provide hearing tests for employees at risk.

STEP 7 Consider noise levels when purchasing new equipment or installing a new process.

STEP 8 Use signs to remind staff to wear ear protection when in noisy areas.

STEP 9 Keep records of all the steps you have taken to reduce noise.

case study

A barman was recently awarded £57,000 for hearing loss which he alleged was caused by exposure to loud music from "live" entertainment bands playing in the bar whilst he was on duty.

■ For further information:

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