

Noise: Controlling Your Exposure at Work

Are you concerned about excessive noise levels in your work environment? By law, employees who are exposed to noise levels exceeding an established Action Level (AL), which is defined as half of the Permissible Exposure Limit (PEL), must be provided with hearing protectors, training, and hearing tests (audiometry). As a general rule, noise exceeds the AL when persons in the area find it hard to understand one another without raising their voices while standing at arm's length. The Office of Environment, Health & Safety (EH&S) can determine if noise exceeds the AL or PEL in your work area.

There are several ways to protect against exposure to excessive noise levels. Engineering controls involve changes in the work area or equipment; administrative controls involve changes in work procedures. Usually one or the other provides sufficient protection. The law requires that these controls be considered before employees are made to wear hearing protection. If engineering and administrative controls are not feasible or will not provide adequate protection, hearing protection devices, training, and audiometry must be provided to employees.

Getting the Right Hearing Protection

EH&S works with University Health Services (UHS) and your department to analyze the work environment and decide which protective measures are appropriate. Here's an outline of the process:

1. The employee lets his/her supervisor know about possible excessive noise levels in the workplace.
2. The employee's supervisor contacts the Department Safety Coordinator and EH&S to evaluate the work environment.
3. EH&S analyzes the work environment to determine if excessive noise exists. If noise is in excess of regulatory limits, EH&S determines how the noise can be reduced to acceptable levels through engineering or administrative controls.
4. If these controls are not feasible, or found to be ineffective, the employee is enrolled in the Hearing Conservation Program. The employee receives no-cost training and audiometric testing at UHS (Tang Center), and the supervisor provides protective hearing protectors (ear plugs or muffs). Also, workplace noise exposure monitoring will continue and annual refresher training will be provided on the hazards of noise and the proper use of hearing protectors. Audiometric testing is also repeated annually for individuals enrolled in the Hearing Conservation Program.



Hearing Protection Responsibilities

Employees, supervisors, EH&S, and UHS all have responsibilities in the Hearing Conservation Program.

| Who's Responsible? | Action |
|-----------------------|--|
| Employees | Report potential noise hazards and hearing protector problems to supervisor. Wear approved hearing protectors in posted noise areas. Maintain hearing protectors in sanitary condition and replace when necessary. |
| Employee's Supervisor | Identify, with the help of EH&S, those employees who may need hearing protection. Ensure that employees exposed to noise are given training and provided with audiometric exams and at least two types of hearing protectors to choose from. Post areas known to present noise hazards with signs requiring the use of hearing protectors. |
| EH&S | Monitor work sites for noise levels and inform employees and supervisors of results. Recommend engineering and administrative controls wherever practical. Assist employees and supervisors in selecting proper hearing protection devices and provide instruction on their use. |
| UHS | Provide baseline and audiometric hearing tests. Provide information and training on noise hazards and hearing conservation. |

Additional Information

For employees enrolled in the Hearing Conservation Program, departments must provide at least two types of protective devices. Ideally one type of ear plug and one type of ear muff should be available. Contact EH&S for vendor information on these devices.

EH&S and UHS maintain records of all noise exposure monitoring and audiometric testing. These records are made available upon request to employees or their representatives. In addition, affected employees and/or their designated representatives are provided with an opportunity to observe the noise measurements and will be notified in writing if the employee is exposed at or above regulatory limits.

For further information, contact either EH&S at 642-3073 or the UHS Occupational Health Clinic at 642-6891.

