

Noise Hazards

One-quarter of all British Columbia's workers are exposed to occupational noise loud enough to damage their hearing. Noise is the most common health hazard in industry. Excessive noise damages tiny sensory cells deep inside the ear. Hearing loss can occur so gradually that you may not realize it is happening. Noise-induced hearing loss is permanent – it can't be cured or improved.

How Much Is Too Much?

There are maximum limits for noise exposure in the workplace, both for loudness and duration. A simple way to test the noise level is to stand at arm's length from someone and talk to him or her. If you must raise your voice to be heard, the noise around you is probably excessive.

The length of exposure to noise is as critical as the loudness. Continuous noise throughout a shift is more damaging than a few minutes at a time. If your ears ring or sounds seem muffled after the noise stops, your hearing has been affected, at least temporarily.

A noise level greater than 85 decibels (dBA) averaged over eight hours can damage hearing. Work-related noise loud enough to cause damage doesn't just occur in heavy industrial and construction worksites. Potentially harmful noise can also come from a variety of less obvious sources, including

- Kitchen equipment (e.g., blenders)
- Gardening and landscape equipment (e.g., lawn mowers, leaf blowers)
- Musical instruments
- Recorded music or movies
- Public address and amplification systems
- Cleaning equipment (e.g., vacuum cleaners)
- Traffic

Protection Practices

It's an employer's responsibility to reduce workplace noise. Workplace design is the best way to decrease noise exposure. The source of noise can be housed in sound-muffling enclosures (e.g., enclosures for air compressors or punch presses). If this isn't practical, a worker can be enclosed in a booth that protects her or him from noise. Another way to reduce noise is to install sound-absorbent materials on walls or ceilings near noisy machinery. Workers' exposure to noise can also be reduced by using job rotation to decrease the time they spend in noisy areas.

Until noise can be reduced to safe levels, an employer must provide workers with appropriate hearing protection at no cost. Hearing protection equipment includes earmuffs, earplugs, and earcaps. Different types of protection are required depending on factors such as the amount of noise, the temperature, the need to communicate on the job, and the availability of other personal protective equipment on the job.