

Noise induced hearing loss

Turn it down!

Hearing loss caused by exposure to noise at work is a significant occupational disease, with around 170,000 people in the UK suffering deafness, tinnitus or other ear conditions as a result of exposure to excessive noise at work.

Claims against employers have risen significantly in the last two years. This reflects the number of sufferers, but also the wide range of industries affected and just as importantly the lack of records to help show whether employers took appropriate steps or not.

Noise induced hearing loss is completely preventable. It's important to take steps to protect employee's hearing but also to record these steps and ensure they are adhered to on the factory floor or construction site to help your clients defend actions against them.

The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005 requires employers to prevent or reduce risks to health and safety from exposure to noise at work. This involves the following steps:

Assessing the risk to employees from noise at work

A risk assessment will involve taking measurements of noise levels and comparing them against the exposure action and exposure limit values (see 'levels of noise' box). In addition, where a risk from noise is identified, employers need to identify where this risk is; who is likely to be affected and what needs to be done to comply with the law. It will also identify employees where the exposure means that they require health surveillance.

Taking action to reduce noise exposure

If an employer identifies a risk they must take action to reduce the noise exposure wherever possible. This action could take many different forms. For example, where the noise is from machinery it might be possible to reduce the noise through servicing, replacing worn parts or fitting engineering controls such as silencers or anti-vibration mounts. In some instances it may even be sensible to replace it with something that makes less noise.

Providing hearing protection

Where the noise exposure cannot be reduced, employers are required to provide hearing protection such as ear defenders. These must be properly maintained and training provided to ensure that employees use them correctly.

It must also be remembered that this should not be regarded as an alternative to controlling noise by technical or organisational means.

Making sure the legal limits are not exceeded

The regulations set limits at which employers must take specific action (see 'levels of noise' box). The lower and upper exposure action values relate to an average daily or weekly exposure and a maximum noise level, which is known as the peak sound pressure.

In addition the regulations include levels of noise exposure which must not be exceeded - the exposure limit values.

Providing employees with information, instruction and training

If employees are exposed above the lower action value, employers must ensure they understand the risks. This includes outlining the risk to their hearing and the steps the company is taking to reduce the risk; how to obtain and use hearing protection; and the health surveillance systems in place.

out annually for the first two years of employment, then every three years. More frequent testing is required in high risk environments or where hearing damage is identified.

For more information visit Allianz's Risk Director. www.riskdirector.co.uk

Carrying out health surveillance

Where there is a risk to employees' hearing, an employer must provide regular hearing checks in controlled conditions. These checks need to be carried out by someone with appropriate training, for instance an occupational health professional, and must be carried



Noise at work - levels of noise

	Daily or weekly exposure	Peak sound pressure
Lower exposure action value	80dB	135dB
Upper exposure action value	85dB	137dB
Exposure limit values (level of noise which must not be exceeded)	87dB	140dB