

Noise at Work – The Health Effects

Noise has been described as unwanted sound, which may be distracting, annoying or cause physical damage to the body (e.g. temporary or permanent hearing damage).

Noise at work can cause hearing loss that can be temporary or permanent. People often experience temporary deafness after leaving a noisy place. Although hearing recovers within a few hours, this should not be ignored. It is a sign that if you continue to be exposed to the noise your hearing could be permanently damaged. Permanent hearing damage can be caused immediately by sudden, extremely loud, explosive noises, for example from guns or cartridge-operated machines.

Hearing loss is usually gradual because of prolonged exposure to noise. It may only be when damage caused by noise over the years combines with hearing loss due to ageing that people realize how deaf they have become. This may mean their family complains about the television being too loud, they cannot keep up with conversations in a group, or they have trouble using the telephone. Eventually everything becomes muffled and people find it difficult to catch sounds like 't', 'd' and 's', so they confuse similar words.

Hearing loss is not the only problem. People may develop tinnitus (ringing, whistling, buzzing or humming in the ears), a distressing condition which can lead to disturbed sleep.

Noise induced hearing loss is often cumulative and not immediately obvious, so its threat is seldom recognized or taken seriously. Whilst the effects of noise are irreversible, noise induced hearing loss is totally preventable.

Remember: Young people can be damaged as easily as the old

Health Surveillance

Regulation 9 of The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005 states that 'if the risk assessment indicates that there is a risk to the health of their employees who are, or are liable to be, exposed to noise, the employer shall ensure that such employees are placed under suitable health surveillance, which shall include testing of the hearing'.

Health surveillance is a programme of systematic health checks to identify early signs and symptoms of work-related ill health and to allow action to be taken to prevent its progression. Suitable health surveillance usually means regular hearing checks (audiometric testing).

There is strong evidence to show that regular exposure above the upper exposure action values can pose a risk to health, you should therefore provide health surveillance to workers regularly exposed above the upper exposure action value. Where exposure is between the lower and upper exposure action values, or where employees are only occasionally exposed above the upper exposure action values, you should provide health surveillance if you find out that an individual may be particularly sensitive to noise.

This may be from past medical history, audiometric test results from previous jobs, other independent assessments or a history of exposure to noise levels exceeding the upper exposure action values. A few individuals may also indicate a family history of becoming deaf early on in life.

Further information

Further information is available in the following HSE publication available from HSE Books or all good bookshops:-

- Controlling noise at work – The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005, ISBN Number 0717661644

Or on the Health & Safety Executive Website www.hse.gov.uk

Or from South Holland District Council, Community & Neighborhood Services, Safety & Environment Team, 01775 761161