

NOISE IN THE WORKPLACE

Your Practical Guide



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Introduction

Noise is unwanted sound. One person's music is another person's noise. And sound generated in a working environment that has the potential to cause damage to hearing is noise.

Damage to hearing, or occupational deafness arising from exposure to high levels of workplace noise, is normally gradual in its onset. The true cause can be obscured by being mistaken for deafness caused by age, disease or exposure to other sources of noise such as loud music, shooting or motorcycle sports.

However, as most occupational deafness is due to prolonged exposure to high levels of workplace noise, the exposure time, noise frequency and intensity are important factors in its prevention.

Risk Identification

Your general risk assessment work requires that you identify all the hazards and assess all the risks associated with work activities. It has been recognised for some time that exposure to high noise levels over long periods is a hazard, resulting in the risk of hearing damage.

Here is a rough guide to help you understand if you have a noise problem. If you have to shout to hold a conversation in the workplace, or have difficulty being heard clearly by someone about 2 metres away, then it is very likely that the noise levels being generated are sufficiently high to cause hearing damage.

This is also likely to be the case where a high level of impulse noise is evident. In both cases, a more detailed noise measurement survey and assessment will be required.

Current Legislation, principally the Noise at Work Regulations 1989 requires that adequate noise assessments be made where employees are likely to be exposed to:

- 85 decibels (dB(A)) or above – known as the First Action Level, or
- 200 Pascals (Pa) or above – known as the Peak Action Level.

However, changes implemented by the European Health and Safety Commission have resulted in the Physical Agents (Noise) Directive being adopted by the UK.

This requires the reduction of noise exposure levels to:

- 80 decibels (dB(A)) or above – known as the First Action Level, or
- 112 Pascals (Pa) or above – known as the Peak Action Level.

At the current time it is not certain exactly when these new limits will take effect and become law in the UK but it will certainly be within the next 3 years.

To ensure that such assessments can be considered adequate, they should:

- identify who is exposed to high noise levels
- provide such information to ensure compliance with legislation
- review noise levels where a significant change in work activities has occurred
- be recorded and kept until a reassessment is made.

Hierarchy of Control

Once you've carried out your noise assessments, a hierarchy of control measures should be adopted as follows:

- reduce your employees' exposure to noise so far as is reasonably practicable, other than by the use of hearing protectors
- adequately assess all daily noise exposure, where it is likely to exceed the First Action Level of 85dB(A).

First Action Level

Where the assessment reveals that your employees' daily exposure level is between 85 and 90 dB(A), you must provide them with suitable hearing protection on request, and also adequate information, instruction and training to enable them to understand:

- the risk of damage to their hearing
- what steps they can take to minimise the risk
- where and how hearing protection can be obtained
- their duties under the Regulations.

Second Action Level

Where the assessment reveals that their daily exposure level exceeds the Second Action Level of 90 dB(A), you should reduce the daily noise exposure as far as reasonably practicable by:

- interrupting the noise transmission path (e.g. screening); or
- isolating those exposed (e.g. noise havens); or
- reducing their exposure time (e.g. job rotation).

Hearing Protection Zones

If – after implementing all reasonably practical steps to reduce noise – the exposure levels remain above 90 dB(A), you must ensure the work areas involved are designated hearing protection zones and:

- install signs to show clearly where the zones are
- provide suitable hearing protection
- enforce the wearing of hearing protection by everyone who enters the zones.

Competence

All noise assessments should be undertaken by a competent person who has the appropriate knowledge, experience and skill. In some cases this will require additional training so they can meet the objective of the legislation by being able to measure noise, identify all the workers likely to be exposed and provide enough information to enable the appropriate action to be taken.

In all but the simplest cases, noise assessments will require specialist help which is unlikely to be available in-house and therefore should be sought externally.

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