

The aim of the Noise Regulations is to ensure that workers' hearing is protected from excessive noise at their place of work, which could cause them to lose their hearing and/or to suffer from tinnitus (permanent ringing in the ears). Hearing damage caused by exposure to noise at work is permanent and incurable. Research estimates that over 2 million people are exposed to noise levels at work that may be harmful. There are many new cases of people receiving compensation for hearing damage each year, through both civil claims and the Government disability benefit scheme, with considerable costs to industry, society and, most importantly, the people who suffer the disability.

Hearing loss is usually gradual due to prolonged exposure to noise. It may only be when damage caused by noise over the years combines with normal hearing loss due to ageing that people realise how deaf they have become. Hearing damage can also be caused immediately by sudden, extremely loud noises. Exposure to noise can also cause tinnitus, which is a sensation of noises in the ears such as ringing or buzzing. Tinnitus may occur in combination with hearing loss.

The level at which employers must provide hearing protection and hearing protection zones is now 85 decibels (daily or weekly average exposure) and the level at which employers must assess the risk to workers' health and provide them with information and training is now 80 decibels. There is also an exposure limit value of 87 decibels, taking account of any reduction in exposure provided by hearing protection, above which workers must not be exposed.

## Is there a noise problem where you work?

**Probably, if you can answer 'yes' to any of these questions about the noise where you work:**

Is the noise intrusive – like a busy street, a vacuum cleaner or a crowded restaurant – for most of the working day?

Do you have to raise your voice to have a normal conversation when about 2 m apart for at least part of the day?

Do you use noisy powered tools or machinery for over half an hour a day?

Do you work in a noisy industry, e.g. construction, demolition or road repair, woodworking, plastics processing, engineering, textile manufacture, general fabrication, forging, pressing or stamping, paper or board making, canning or bottling; foundries?

Are there noises because of impacts (e.g. hammering, drop forging, pneumatic impact tools etc), explosive sources such as cartridge-operated tools or detonators, or guns?

You are also at risk if you have muffled hearing at the end of the day, even if it is better by the next morning. However, there is no need for your hearing to be damaged at all – your employer has a duty to protect you and should be working on measures to reduce the risk.

### What does an employer have to do?

The law says your employer has to:

Find out what levels of noise you are exposed to and assess the risk to your hearing.

Depending on the levels of noise exposure, your employer must:

Control the noise exposure by 'engineering' it out, e.g. by putting in screens or barriers, or fitting a silencer.

Change the way you work or the layout of the workplace – not just rely on hearing protectors.

Provide the quietest machinery that will do the job.

Give you hearing protection (a selection, so you can choose a type that suits you).

Send you for regular hearing checks.

Provide you with training and information.

Consult you and your representatives.

What do you, the employee have to do?

Co-operate. Help your employer to do what is needed to protect your hearing. Make sure you use properly any noise control devices (e.g. noise enclosures), and follow any working methods that are put in place.

Wear any hearing protection you are given. Wear it properly (you should be trained how to do this), and make sure you wear it all the time when you are doing noisy work, and when you are in hearing protection areas. Taking it off even for a short while means that your hearing could still be damaged.

Look after your hearing protection. Your employer should tell you how to look after it and where you can get it from. Make sure you understand what you need to do.

Report any problems. Report any problems with your hearing protection or noise control devices straight away. Let your employer or safety representative know. If you have any ear trouble, let your employer know.

## What do you have to look out for?

Hearing protection such as earmuffs and earplugs is your last line of defence against damage, so check the following: Earmuffs - make sure they totally cover your ears, fit tightly and there are no gaps around the seals. Don't let hair, jewellery, glasses, hats etc interfere with the seal. Try and keep the seals and the insides clean. Don't stretch the headband too much – make sure it keeps its tension.

Earplugs - they can be difficult to fit properly – practise fitting them and get help if you are having trouble. Often they can look like they are fitted properly, but they may not be giving you much protection. Clean your hands before you fit earplugs, and don't share them. Some types you use only once, others can be re-used and even washed – make sure you know which type you have.

For more information on controlling noise visit <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/priced/l108.pdf> to download The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005 Guidance on Regulations.