



Managing Noise Risk

Risk Management Guidance

Introduction

Hearing loss caused by exposure to noise at work continues to be a significant occupational disease. Some 17,000 [1] people in the UK suffer deafness, tinnitus or other ear conditions as a result of exposure to excessive noise at work.

Hearing loss caused by work is preventable but once your hearing has gone it won't come back. Damage can cause loss of hearing ability and people may also suffer a permanent sensation of ringing in the ears, known as tinnitus.

Factors that contribute to hearing damage are noise levels and how long people are exposed to the noise, daily or over a number of years.

The Issues

Noise is part of everyday life, but loud noise can permanently damage hearing. The same applies to noise in the workplace. Noise at work can cause hearing damage that is permanent and disabling. This can be hearing loss that is gradual because of exposure to noise over time, but also damage caused by sudden, extremely loud noises. The damage is disabling as it can stop people being able to understand speech, keep up with conversations or use the telephone.

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. Over time, exposure to excessive noise can also have negative impacts on the mental health of your staff. As well as issues relating to their inability to concentrate and increased irritation, there're also certain effects of excessive noise on mental health.[2]

Noise at work can interfere with communications and make warnings harder to hear. It can also reduce people's awareness of their surroundings. These issues can lead to safety risks – putting people at risk of injury or death.

Notes

1. The 2008/09 Labour Force Survey (LFS) shows an estimated 17,000 individuals who worked in the previous 12 months, who believed their hearing problems were the most serious of their work related illnesses. Previous figures show all illnesses caused or made worse by work were recorded which resulted in significantly higher numbers being recorded.
2. A 2019 noise and wellbeing at work survey found that 65% of employees surveyed reported the noise in their workplace had an impact on their ability to complete work in an accurate and timely manner. It was also found that almost half of the employees surveyed (44%) believed working in noisy conditions harmed their stress levels and overall wellbeing.

Regulations

The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005 (the 'Noise Regulations') require employers to eliminate or reduce risks to health and safety from noise at work. Depending on the level of risk, employers should:

- take action to reduce the noise exposure; and also
- provide your employees with personal hearing protection.

Other duties under the Regulations include the need to:

- make sure the legal limits on noise exposure are not exceeded;
- maintain and ensure the use of equipment you provide to control noise risks;
- provide your employees with information, instruction and training; and
- carry out health surveillance (monitor workers' hearing ability).

The Regulations apply where work activities expose people at work (your employees or other workers affected by your work activities) to risks to their health and safety from noise.

Identification

You will probably need to do something about the noise if any of the following apply:

- the noise is intrusive – for example, as noisy as a busy road, a vacuum cleaner or a crowded restaurant – or worse than intrusive, for most of the working day;
- your employees have to raise their voices to carry out a normal conversation when about 2 m apart for at least part of the day;
- your employees use noisy powered tools or machinery for more than half an hour each day;
- your sector is one known to have noisy tasks, e.g. construction, demolition or road repair; woodworking; plastics processing; engineering; textile manufacture; general fabrication; forging or stamping; paper or board making; canning or bottling; foundries; waste and recycling;
- there are noises due to impacts (such as hammering, drop forging, pneumatic impact tools, etc.), explosive sources such as cartridge-operated tools or detonators, or guns.

Situations where you will need to consider safety issues in relation to noise include where:

- you use warning sounds to avoid or alert to dangerous situations;
- working practices rely on verbal communications;
- there is work around mobile machinery or traffic.

Next Steps

If any of the statements in the previous section apply, it is likely you will need to take some further action. You should carry out a risk assessment to decide what action is needed, and develop a plan. A risk assessment means more than just taking measurements of noise – measurements may not even be necessary.

Your risk assessment should:

- identify where there may be a risk from noise and who is likely to be affected, include:
 - risks to health; and
 - risks to safety;

- contain an estimate of your employees' exposures to noise (see: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/noise/calculator.htm>)
- identify what you need to do to comply with the law, e.g. whether noise-control measures and/or personal hearing protection are needed, or whether working practices are safe; and
- identify any employees who need to be provided with health surveillance and whether any are at particular risk.

You must record the findings of your risk assessment. You must also record the action you have taken, or intend to take, to comply with the law. You should review your risk assessment if circumstances change or if it is no longer valid, for example if the work changes and this affects workers' noise exposure, or there are changes to the availability, applicability or cost of noise-control measures. You should not leave it for more than two years without checking whether a review is needed.

Risk Management Advice

It is essential that you can show that your estimate of employees' exposure is representative of the work that they do. It needs to take account of:

- the work they do or are likely to do;
- the ways in which they do the work; and
- how it might vary from one day to the next.

Your estimate must be based on reliable information, e.g. measurements in your own workplace, information from other workplaces similar to yours, or data from suppliers of machinery.

You must record the findings of your risk assessment. You need to record in an action plan anything you identify as being necessary to comply with the law, setting out what you have done and what you are going to do, with a timetable and saying who will be responsible for the work.

Review your risk assessment if circumstances in your workplace change and affect noise exposures. Also review it regularly to make sure that you continue to do all that is reasonably practicable to control the noise risks. Even if it appears that nothing has changed, you should not leave it for more than about two years without checking whether a review is needed.

Checklist

Identification of noise hazards

Has a hazard identification for noise been carried out?

For example, do people need to raise voices to speak with someone two metres away?

Are there very loud impact noises?

Have there been any workers' compensation claims for hearing loss?

Noise risk assessment

Have noise risk assessments been carried out by a competent person?

Are any workers exposed above the exposure standard?

Is the noise risk assessment current, that is, is it more than 2 years since last review?

Hazard controls

Is there a policy to choose quieter tools and equipment, for example, noise reducing circular saw blades?

Does the workplace layout position noisy work well away from quiet work, for example, tile cutting and brick cutting?

Are tools/equipment and noise controls maintained so as to minimise noise?

Is work planned to minimise the time workers are exposed to excessive noise?

Are noise sources and noise controls maintained so as to minimise noise?

Personal hearing protection

Is compliant hearing protection supplied and correctly worn by workers who may be exposed to a noise hazard?

Do hearing protection areas have signs?

Are workers trained in fitting, use, selection, maintenance, replacement and storage of hearing protection?

Information and training

Are information and training on noise hazards, effects and controls provided?

Hearing tests

Is an audiometric testing program made available to workers exposed above the exposure standard?

Are appropriate actions taken if hearing loss is found to occur?

Further information and guidance on this subject is available from:

- The Health and Safety Executive - <https://www.hse.gov.uk/>

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For clarification or further information please contact –

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