



5-minute safety talk

Play it by Ear: Hearing Protection Safety

There are some diseases that creep up on you — no symptoms or warnings of any kind. Suddenly, when it's too late to do anything about a cure, they manifest themselves.

Hearing loss from noise can occur in a similar fashion. Its progress is so slow and sneaky that you hardly notice it, because you just simply adjust as sound reception becomes fainter.

People who work around noise without protection probably don't realize what's happening to their hearing. In fact, most people are unaware that the everyday noises such as a lawnmower or food processor all have an effect on hearing. However, since the damage accumulates over many years, it's often too late to prevent or reverse what has already been done.

Exposure to a large amount of sound will cause a person's hearing to worsen temporarily. However, if that person rests and avoids loud noises, their hearing will return to its normal level. It is when a person is continually surrounded by loud noises that the damage becomes permanent.

Every person will experience some amount of natural hearing loss as an effect of aging. On the other hand, simple steps such as lowering the volume on your stereo can keep the hearing loss to a minimal amount.

Prolonged exposure to loud noises can cause permanent hearing loss. But noise can be reduced before it ever reaches your ear drum by ear plugs or ear muffs. If ear protection is necessary in your job, get it and wear it!

Trained professional safety and medical personnel can tell you which type of protection you need. But whatever kind you use, be sure it fits snugly.

The subject of hearing protection is riddled with myths. Below are five excuses for not wearing proper hearing protection.

- 1. I can't hear other workers.** At high noise levels, hearing becomes overloaded. Reducing overall sound levels allows the ear to operate more effectively in much the same way sunglasses provide improved vision in very bright, high-glare conditions.
- 2. My machine sounds different.** True, but workers will become accustomed to the new sound and will be able to monitor the sound of their machines as well at the end of the day as at the start of the shift.
- 3. I'm used to the noise.** Exposure to noise does not toughen ears. Ears do not become used to noise, they become deaf.
- 4. Protectors are uncomfortable.** Like new shoes or glasses, new hearing protectors need a period of adjustment. If discomfort persists, the device should be exchanged for a different size, fit or type which will be more comfortable.
- 5. I've already lost some of my hearing, why should I wear hearing protection now?** Just because you've lost some hearing doesn't mean you're protected from losing more or all of it. Initially, hearing is damaged in higher frequencies. However, as the unprotected exposures continue, this damage spreads to the lower frequencies, eventually affecting those essential to the understanding of speech. Although hearing protection devices cannot restore a noise-induced hearing loss, they should prevent additional losses from occurring.

Finally, it's important to remember that once hearing protection is put on, it needs to be monitored. Hearing protection can be loosened or jostled out of position and needs to be readjusted from time to time to be most effective.

Therefore, it's best to follow safety rules and instructions carefully. Don't play it by ear. When the job calls for ear protection, use it!

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