Addressing Your Concerns about Hearing Protection

Addressing Your Concerns about Hearing Protection

What’s at Stake?

Hearing loss is one of the fastest growing chronic conditions facing today’s workers, affecting nearly 30 million people in the United States and Canada. While there are many causes of hearing loss, noise-induced hearing loss (NIHL) is one of the most common types and it can affect anyone who is exposed to loud sounds or noise over a long period of time, whether at work or during recreational activities.

What’s the Danger?

Hearing loss can have a profound effect on your quality of life. You might endure a permanent ringing in your ears. Sounds become distorted or muffled, making it difficult to watch TV or hold a conversation. There are also psychological effects that come with being unable to communicate with others, such as frustration, withdrawal and depression.

How to Protect Yourself

NIHL is irreversible, but it is also preventable. To protect yourself, you need to know which noises can cause damage (those at or above 85 decibels) and you need to wear hearing protection whenever you’re exposed to high noise levels.

In order for your hearing protection to do its job, you have to take good care of it so it will work properly in a crisis. And you have to wear it properly and consistently.

Unfortunately, not everyone follows these simple instructions. Why not? Usually because of misinformation. So let's address some common concerns about hearing protection.

Concern #1: *If I wear hearing protection, I won't be able to hear warning sounds or detect if a machine is not functioning properly.*

If your hearing is not damaged, then you should be able to hear warning and machinery sounds just fine, although they may sound different to you at first. If your hearing is already damaged, then hearing protection may slightly affect your ability to hear these sounds. Talk to your fitter about possibly wearing hearing aids under earmuffs.

Concern #2: *Hearing protection is uncomfortable.*

At first, you may find hearing protection to be uncomfortable. But—just like a new pair of shoes—if the device fits properly and is worn correctly, you should get used to it eventually.

Concern #3: *The noise doesn't bother me like it does other people. Am I just getting used to it?*

Sorry, but the ear does not get used to noise. If you're not being affected by loud noise then you may already be developing hearing loss. Get your hearing checked right away.

Concern #4: *Earplugs cause ear infections.*

It's unlikely, as ear infections are generally caused by a virus in the middle or inner ear, or some kind of scratch in the ear canal that might be aggravated by the earplug. When selecting your hearing protection, talk to the fitter about any conditions you have that might interfere with or be aggravated by an earplug. You may want to wear an earmuff until the condition clears up.

Concern #5: *I tried hearing protection before. It didn't work for me then, so it won't work for me now.*

Hearing protectors are only effective if they fit properly and are worn correctly. Select your hearing protection carefully and be sure to fit each ear separately. Your ear canals may differ from

each other in size and shape.

Final Word

Listen up! Noise-induced hearing loss is permanent. But preventing it is simple: Select the protection that’s right for you and use it properly whenever you are exposed to high noise.

Test Your Knowledge

1. When first wearing hearing protection, it may take a while to adjust to how familiar workplace equipment now
    - True False
2. Hearing protection is always uncomfortable, even if it’s properly
    - True False
3. When selecting your hearing protection, what should you consider choosing if you have a scratch in your ear canal?

_____

_____

4. The size and shape of a person’s ear canal is the same in both
    - True False
5. Over time, the ear adapts to loud noises without incurring any
    - True False

What Would You Do?

You’ve been working on a new machine for the past week and were given earplugs to use, but you find them really uncomfortable and don’t always wear them. Now you’re experiencing a ringing or humming in your ears when you leave work. What should you do?

Before The Talk – Preparation Tips

1. It’s important to select the appropriate hearing protection. Share with your workers these factors that they should consider when making their selection:

- Comfort
- How much noise reduction is needed Cleanliness of the site
- Compatibility with other PPE Special job requirements Communication needs Temperature of work environment The worker’s own hearing ability Physical requirements of the job Ease of use
- The worker’s own physical characteristics

2. Is it time to conduct a new hazard assessment for PPE requirements? Generally, these should be done: Before a project begins or a site opens

- Daily at sites where conditions and hazards change all the time
- At reasonably practicable intervals to prevent development of unsafe and unhealthy conditions
- When new work processes are introduced
- When work processes or operations change
- When significant incidents suggest that hazards have changed or hazards not identified in previous assessments are present
- Review the results of your most recent hazard assessment at your meeting.

3. A study published in Noise and Health found that, among factory workers evaluated by researchers, 76% reported that their hearing was excellent or good, yet 46% of the same workers tested positive for a hearing loss of >25 dB at the OSHA recommended frequencies of 2, 3 and 4 kHz in either ear. Encourage your workers to have regular hearing tests, especially if they can answer “yes” to any of these questions.

- Do you often have to ask people to repeat what they have said?
- Is it hard to follow what one person is saying in a room where everyone is talking?
- Is it harder for you to hear things when you first leave work, with your hearing returning to normal a few hours later?

- Is it difficult for you to hear on the telephone?
- Do you get confused about where a sound is coming from?

Answers to Quiz:

1 True,

2 False,

3 an earmuff until the scratch heals,

4 False,

5 False.