Noise and Hearing Protection Fatality File

In 2008, Jeff Ammon, 55, began noticing a feeling of pressure in his ears every day after work.

Over the next months, when his symptoms progressed into a slight loss of hearing and sensitivity to noise, he became worried. Ammon, a construction worker for 32 years, eventually started wearing ear protection hoping this would address these complaints – but it was too late.

From that point on, sounds ranging from the hum of a lawnmower to normal tones of conversation caused a piercing, jabbing pain in his inner ear. He stopped working in 2011, when the pain became unbearable. He also hears ringing in his ears and experiences dizziness, both side effects of the auditory damage.

“It’s debilitating … completely,” he said.

Ammon spent almost all of his working life surrounded by the loud noises of jackhammers, saws and air compressors.

Ammon worked for several small construction companies building houses. He said he was never told to wear ear protection. His colleagues didn’t wear it either. No one talked about it and, even when he worked with loud equipment, he wasn’t aware of the need for ear protection.

He applied for Social Security disability benefits but was rejected because his condition was not on the Social Security Administration’s list of medical diseases considered disabling. When he first experienced his symptoms, he visited dozens of audiologists who only told him he had slight hearing loss. Research linking hyperacusis – unusual tolerance toward ordinary sounds – and pain was only at its infancy. Specific treatments still are not available for people with this type of hearing damage.

These days, he experiments with new medications or therapies, hoping for more awareness about the illness – and about protecting hearing at the workplace. He is waiting for the third appeal for Social Security disability benefits.

“I’m hearing a little more about it, but not nearly enough,” he said. “And it needs to start at the workplace.”

Now he avoids going outdoors, choosing instead to stay in his soundproof basement in Lebanon, Pa., and communicate with his doctor mostly through an online patient portal.

“The medication to address pain has not been very successful at all. … I’m also on some medication for stress, anxiety and depression,” he said. “It has isolated me from society.”