Noise induced hearing loss

Every day we experience noise in our environment, but some noise can be harmful when it is too loud, whether for just a brief time, or we are repeatedly exposed to the noise. Excessive levels of noise can damage sensitive structures in the inner ear and cause noise-induced hearing loss.

Noise levels

The loudness of sound is measured in units called decibels. Noise-induced hearing loss can be caused by a **one-time exposure** to very loud sound or by **repeated exposure** to sounds at various volume levels over an **extended period of time**.

Examples of decibel levels include:

- normal conversation – approximately 60 decibels
- the humming of a refrigerator – 40 decibels
- heavy city traffic noise – can be 85 decibels
- a lawn mower – on average 90 decibels
- a leaf blower – approximately 110 decibels.

The louder the sound, the less time you can safely listen to it. Sounds may be pleasant like music but if too loud can still damage your hearing.

Excessive noise

Noise is considered excessive when you must use a raised voice or shout in order to be able to speak to someone at arm's length or about one metre away. A pre-existing hearing impairment does not protect a person from further noise damage nor does it give a person less susceptibility to further noise-induced hearing damage.

Signs of hearing loss

Loss of hearing is a gradual but painless process. If you work or frequently spend time in a noisy place or listen to loud music you could be losing your hearing without even realising it.

Signs that you may have suffered some hearing loss include:

- turning the TV or stereo up so loud that others complain
- frequently needing to ask others to repeat themselves or thinking people mumble
- not being able to hear properly on the telephone

- finding it hard to hear in noisy situations such as restaurants or around groups of people
- missing out on important parts of conversations – you can hear but not understand.

Treatment is limited

Once your hearing is damaged it will never come back. There is no surgery, medication, implant, transplant or healing over time. Hearing aids magnify the volume of the sounds you do hear but they cannot bring back the sounds you are missing.

Hearing Conservation Program

Hearing tests are provided to staff identified by the department's Hearing Conservation Program as being the most at risk when it comes to excessive noise levels. For more information refer to the Hearing Conservation Program fact sheet

Managing noise in the workplace

To create a safe, low-noise working environment, schools need to identify activities that generate excessive noise levels and implement and maintain measures to prevent noise-induced hearing loss.

Management of noise should include:

- researching and determining noise levels of equipment prior to their purchase and trying to 'buy quiet';
- redesigning of tasks so that staff are not exposed to loud noise over extended periods;
- repairing and maintaining equipment and machinery to reduce their noise levels; and
- the provision of personal hearing protection and training for relevant staff in the correct use and storage of the hearing protection.

You can also review your workplace and examine quieter alternative work practices using the Reviewing noisy environments in schools checklist.

Hearing protection

Earmuffs and earplugs provide protection from hearing damage. For further information about protecting your hearing, visit the following links:

- Hearing protection for instrumental music teachers
- Hearing protection and noise management for manual arts/industrial technology

and design teachers

- Hearing protection for schools officers

Hearing loss and tinnitus

Tinnitus is a permanent ringing or buzzing sound in the ears. This condition can result in a degree of noise-induced hearing loss, making it difficult to communicate effectively or enjoy television or radio. Find out more about tinnitus and how it can affect your life with the department's tinnitus information sheet.

Leisure noise

It is not just noise at work that can damage your hearing. Noise you are exposed to in your leisure time can also be harmful.

To reach the safe daily noise limit, it takes on average:

- using a lawnmower 48 minutes
- using a leaf blower 1½ minutes
- using a hand held drill 15 minutes
- using a chainsaw 14 seconds
- attending a rock concert 8 seconds
- listening to a loud stereo 4½ minutes
- riding a motorbike 4½ minutes.

Hearing protection like earmuffs and earplugs are not just for the workplace. Remember to always protect your hearing whenever you are around loud noise.

Portable music players

Portable music players such as iPods and iPhones are capable of producing very loud levels of noise directed straight into the ear. More information is provided in the Portable Music Players factsheet

Noise Induced Hearing Loss is PREVENTABLE. Once your hearing is gone it will never come back.

PROTECT your hearing - you won't get a second chance.