

# Noise: Questions for Employers

Noise is a hazard that can damage hearing and is one of the most widespread hazards facing New Zealand workers. Hearing loss caused by noise is insidious and permanent. It can cause isolation at home and socially, and can decrease efficiency at work.

The Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 (HSE Act) requires employers to identify any hazards in the workplace, such as noise, and to manage the hazard as far as practicable using the hierarchy of control – elimination, isolation, minimisation. Practicability depends on severity of hazards or risk, state of knowledge about eliminating or reducing the hazard or risk, availability and suitability of appropriate techniques, and cost.

So how do you identify if noise is a problem in your workplace? You need to ask yourself a few simple questions. A series of questions that can be used to rate your workplace for noise problems are listed to the right. If you answer “yes” to any of the questions, hazards from exposure to noise may exist in your workplace.

So what do you do once you have established that a noise hazard exists in your workplace?

If noise is a hazard at the workplace, employers should:

1. Identify if noise is excessive or a problem at work, e.g. find out which workers are likely to be exposed to excessive or intrusive noise, what and where are the sources of noise, and which work practices are noisy.
2. Assess the risks to health and safety from noise exposure, e.g. if someone’s hearing is impaired,

Are there areas in your workplace that you or your employees think are excessively noisy? Yes  No

Do you have to raise your voice to be heard when speaking to your employees in areas in your workplace? Yes  No

Do employees in the workplace notice a reduction in hearing over the day or at the end of the working day? Yes  No

Do employees complain of ringing in the ears, dull hearing, headaches, lack of concentration or irritability during or after work? Yes  No

Are any long-term employees hard of hearing or have been diagnosed with noise-induced hearing loss? Yes  No

are they in danger of not hearing warning buzzers on moving parts or equipment, or not hearing a verbal warning from another employee? Noise also causes noise-induced stress that can lead to irritability, tiredness and headaches.

3. Develop a noise policy and hearing conservation programme, introduce noise control measures, and monitor the effectiveness of the noise control measures.

Employers should develop a noise policy and plan of action to control noise levels at the workplace, e.g. implement control measures – elimination,

isolation, minimisation (see *Noise Control* information sheet), and develop policies for the purchase of new equipment and machinery, and maintenance of existing equipment and machinery.

4. Provide workers with training and information about noise. People involved in managing risks from noise exposure at work should receive training on how they can do this properly. People who could benefit from training include:
  - Managers and supervisors of workers who are at risk of noise-induced hearing loss.
  - Workers likely to be exposed to excessive noise in the workplace.
  - Staff responsible for purchasing plant, noise control equipment, personal hearing protectors, and designing, scheduling, organising and layout of work.
  - Workplace health and safety representatives and members of workplace health and safety committees.
5. Consult with workers about identifying and managing the hazards associated with noise exposure, training needs and any proposed changes to plant or workplace that may increase or reduce noise exposure.
6. Provide audiometric testing for workers. Any worker who is, or is likely to be, regularly exposed to excessive noise at work should have a

hearing loss testing programme that includes tests carried out by a suitably trained person using an appropriate, calibrated machine. This should include an initial test before exposure at the workplace, and should also be done:

- Where there has been a significant change to the employee's noise exposure.
- Periodically, at least once a year.

Employees also have responsibilities. Employees must:

- Follow instructions given to protect them from the hazards associated with noise exposure.
- Use hearing protectors and other types of personal protective equipment as they have been shown in training.
- Not interfere or misuse anything the employer has provided to ensure health and safety at the workplace.
- Not deliberately place at risk the health and safety of anyone at the workplace.
- Not wilfully injure themselves.

If you think there is a potential noise problem at your workplace, act now. Excessive exposure to noise causes hearing loss. Hearing loss leads to a reduction in the quality of life and can, and should be, prevented. In the workplace this can be achieved through a noise control and hearing conservation programme.