

HEARING LOSS



Your job shouldn't cause you to lose your hearing. Yet for many people years of exposure to excessive noises on the job has led to permanent hearing loss.

“Work-related hearing loss is one of the most common occupational diseases in the United States,” says Dr. Linda Rosenstock, director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).

According to NIOSH, 30 million Americans are exposed to hazardous noise at work. This has resulted in a permanent hearing loss for about 10 million workers. If you are one of these people, you don't have to suffer hearing loss. Your supervisors can make changes to the equipment to eliminate or reduce noise. Finally, when engineering or administrative controls can't eliminate your exposure to hazardous noise, you can wear hearing protection devices, such as ear plugs or ear muffs.

Now hear this...

Loud noises can cause hearing loss by damaging the delicate hair cells in the inner ear. Most of the time this damage happens gradually when prolonged exposure to loud sounds exhausts these hair cells, says Dr. Mark Stephenson, NIOSH audiologist. As noise levels increase, the tiny cilia at the top of the hair cells can be injured or broken off. Entire groups of these hair cells can even be torn away. Hair cells don't repair themselves. So when enough hair cells are damaged, a hearing loss results.

Sound is measured in decibels. A normal conversation takes place at about 60 decibels. A woodshop noise level is about 100 decibels, and a chainsaw noise measures about 110 decibels, according to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD). Prolonged exposure to noise above 85 decibels can cause hearing loss.

A short, intense sound—an explosion, for example— may cause immediate hearing loss. But usually hearing loss occurs gradually after prolonged exposure to loud noise. It may occur so gradually you may not even realize you are losing your hearing. Over time, sounds may simply become muffled or distorted.

Tinnitus, a ringing or roaring sound, sometimes described as the sound of crickets in one or both ears, can accompany both immediate and gradual hearing loss.

Tinnitus occurs when the damage to hair cells hasn't gotten to the point where they produce nothing. Rather, the hairs produce ongoing sounds because they are partially damaged. That is, they are constantly stimulated because they are irritated. The brain perceives this constant irritation as sound.

Hearing loss can be progressive if you continue exposing yourself to the same noise. Today you may have a minor or moderate hearing loss, but after further exposure, the loss may become more severe. However, once you stop the exposure, the hearing loss won't get worse.

To see if you may be in an environment that could cause hearing loss, ask yourself the following questions:

Is the noise at my workplace so loud that I have to raise my voice significantly for someone an arm's length away to hear me?

When I leave work and am in a quieter environment, do my ears feel plugged? Or do I hear a mild ringing or whooshing noise that goes away after an hour or two?

If you answer yes to either of these questions, take some sound advice: Get your hearing tested and protect your ears.