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Noise

Tennessee OSHA has instituted a Special Emphasis Program for occupational noise exposure and hearing conservation. This is established to focus statewide attention on occupational noise and to prevent occupational hearing loss in employees. Each day, thousands of workers are exposed on the job to excessive noise levels capable of causing permanent hearing loss.

During all health and safety inspections the TOSHA compliance officer or consultant will make the employer aware of the Special Emphasis Program on noise and measure the noise levels in the workplace. Interventions will be made where there are noise levels above 85 decibels (dB). TOSHA laws for occupational noise exposure require a Hearing Conservation Program when noise exposures exceed 85 dB averaged over 8 hours.

What Can Noise Do to You?

Excessive noise can destroy the ability to hear and may also put stress on other parts of the body, including the heart. Workers exposed to noise sometimes complain of nervousness, sleeplessness, and fatigue. For most effects of noise, there is no cure, so prevention of excessive noise exposure and hearing conservation are very important. The damage done by noise depends mainly on how loud it is and on the length of exposure. The frequency or pitch can also have some effect, since high-pitched sounds are more damaging than low-pitched ones. Noise may tire out the inner ear, causing temporary hearing loss. After a period of time off away from noise, hearing may be restored. With continued noise exposure, the ear will lose its ability to recover from temporary hearing loss, and the damage will be permanent. Permanent hearing loss results from the destruction of hair cells in the inner ear - cells which can never be replaced or repaired. Normally, workplace noise first affects the ability to hear high frequency (high-pitched) sounds. This means that even though a person can still hear some noise, speech or other sounds may be unclear or distorted. Distortion occurs especially when there are background noises or many people talking. A hearing aid can make speech louder, but not make it clearer.

Suggestions for Employers:

Monitor noise exposures to determine who is exposed above an 8-hour time weighted average of 85 dB. You can buy or rent a sound level meter, arrange for a consultant from your workers' compensation carrier or other consultant to conduct the survey. You may call Tennessee OSHA Consultative Services at 1-800-325-9901.

Develop, implement, and maintain (at no cost to employees) a hearing conservation program. For an acceptable program you must:

- Conduct mandatory annual hearing tests
- Make hearing protectors available
- Make hearing protectors mandatory above 90 dB
- Conduct annual training on the effects of noise
- Keep accurate records of audiograms and review them to ensure that your program is "effective"

Reasons People Lose Their Hearing

- People think noise is no threat to them. Noise is not like an air contaminant, which they can smell or see.
- The initial injury to their hearing is not evident and may be hard to detect.
- Noise induced hearing loss is cumulative.
- Serious damage may take years to occur. It may take 10-20 years to become evident.
- People feel hearing protection is too much trouble.
- When audiograms are reviewed, appropriate action is not always taken.
- The importance of using hearing protection was not explained.
- There is a false belief that medical science can correct noise induced hearing loss.
- There is no pain associated with noise in the 85-100 dB range.
- People believe hearing loss is normal.

For more information and publications on noise contact your local Tennessee OSHA office or call 1-800-249-8510.



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