

Listen Up! 4 steps for reducing workplace noise

Noise affects virtually every workplace in Ontario, no matter the size or sector. And without proper controls exposure to noise can lead to many issues. The most obvious impact is noise-induced hearing loss but stress, hypertension, poor sleep and mental health, and physical injury due to communications challenges can all be linked to noise exposure.

One in five adults aged 19 to 79 already have mild hearing loss or more in at least one ear. Chances are, with time and continued exposure their hearing will worsen. Statistics like these have prompted the Ministry of Labour to launch an occupational noise initiative. From April 1, 2017 to March 31, 2018 inspectors will be looking at how — and how well — employers are protecting workers from noise.

A new noise regulation (381/15) passed in July 2016 says employers must follow a “hierarchy of controls” to protect workers. Under this hierarchy, engineering controls and work practices come before personal protective equipment (PPE), such as earplugs and ear muffs. Engineering solutions are the better option because they control noise everywhere eliminating the reliance on workers to wear protection.

Take action now

Create your own noise prevention plan with these four steps.

- 1. Determine if your workers are exposed to high levels of noise.** Be sure to pinpoint the sources of noise and who’s going to be affected where.
- 2. Conduct a risk assessment.** You can do a rudimentary assessment just by walking around and listening. If you’re looking for preliminary numbers, rent a sound level meter. There are also apps available that can be used as screening tools. Smart phone apps must be used cautiously however and shouldn’t be relied on for complete accuracy. If an app provides a number that hovers around 85dB (the current occupational limit over 8 hours), call in an occupational hygienist to do a proper survey.
- 3. Determine the best way to protect employees:**
 - Start with engineering controls. Can you reduce noise at the source or along the path of transmission? Before implementing a control (such as enclosing a machine), check with an expert to ensure you’re not introducing new hazards.
 - Look at work practices. Could repairs make machines less noisy? Could you adjust schedules to reduce workers’ exposure time or duration, or increase distance from the source?
 - Consider Personal Protective Equipment if other controls are not possible. Select PPE carefully though. Talk to employees about what kind of protection they’d prefer and which is most comfortable. Ensure that workers are trained on care and use, including proper fit, limitations, inspection and maintenance, and most importantly hygiene. Dirty ear plugs can lead to other health issues.
- 4. Ensure your controls are working.** Implement a surveillance program that includes audiometric testing to make sure people are using hearing protection correctly and not suffering hearing loss.

For more information on workplace noise, visit wsps.ca/noise

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