

Hearing Conservation

6/01/06

OSHA's hearing conservation program is designed to protect workers with occupational noise exposures from hearing impairment. You are required by regulation to administer a continuing, effective hearing conservation program, whenever employee noise exposures equal or exceed an 8-hour time-weighted average sound level (TWA) of 85 decibels (dB) measured on the A scale. The standard covers monitoring, audiometric testing, hearing protectors, training, and recordkeeping requirements.

Monitoring

You are required to monitor noise exposure levels in a way that accurately identifies employees exposed to noise at or above 85dB averaged over 8 working hours, or an 8-hour TWA. You must monitor all employees whose noise exposure is equivalent to or greater than a noise exposure received in 8 hours where the noise level is constantly 85 dB. If conditions change, where there is an increase noise exposure, repeat monitoring is required. In most cases, your insurance company Loss Control Department or other qualified outside contractors can conduct this noise survey.

Audiometric Testing

You must establish and maintain an audiometric testing program if you have employee exposure to an action level of 85 dB or above, measured as an 8-hour TWA. The audiometric testing must be made available at no cost to all employees who are exposed to the action level. The important elements of the program include baseline audiograms, annual audiograms, training, and follow up procedures. A licensed or certified audiologist, otolaryngologist, or other physician must be responsible and oversee the program. Both professionals and trained qualified technicians may conduct audiometric testing.

Hearing Protectors

You must provide hearing protectors to all workers exposed to 8-hour TWA noise levels of 85dB or above. Employees must wear hearing protectors:

- For any period exceeding 6 months from the time they are first exposed to 8-hour TWA noise levels of 85 dB or above, until they receive their baseline audiograms if these tests are delayed due to mobile test van scheduling;
- If they have incurred standard threshold shifts that demonstrate they are susceptible to noise; and
- If they are exposed to noise over the permissible exposure limit of 90 dB over an 8-hour TWA.

You must provide employees with a selection of at least one variety of hearing plug and one variety of hearing muff. Hearing protectors must adequately reduce the noise level for each employee's work environment. In addition, you must show employees how to use and care for their protectors and supervise them on the job to ensure they continue to wear them correctly.

Training

You must train employees exposed to TWA's of 85 dB and above at least annually in the effects of noise; the purpose, advantages, and disadvantages of various types of hearing protectors; the selection, fit, and care of protectors; and the purpose and procedures of audiometric testing.

Recordkeeping Requirements

You must keep noise exposure measurement records for 2 years and maintain records of audiometric test results for the duration of the affected employee's employment. Beginning January 1, 2004, you are required to record work-related hearing loss cases on the OSHA 300 form in column (M) (5). A noise induced hearing loss is defined for recordkeeping purposes as a change in hearing threshold relative to the baseline audiogram of an average of 10 dB or more in either ear at 2000, 3000 and 4000 hertz, and the employee's total hearing level is 25 dB or more above audiometric zero (also averaged at 2000, 3000 and 4000 hertz) in the same ear(s).

Summary

The above is no more than a summary that highlights the major elements of the OSHA standard §29 CFR 1910.95 Occupational Noise Exposure. For complete details go to OSHA Noise and Hearing Conservation for a comprehensive review that includes sections on:

- What is considered noise and what are the potential health effects?
- What standards limit and control noise exposure?
- How do I evaluate noise exposure?
- What constitutes an effective hearing conservation program?