

TOOLBOX TALK #7

HEARING CONSERVATION

The sound of one jackhammer, chain saw or nail gun can be bothersome enough. But on a construction site, multiple tools and pieces of heavy equipment may be in use at the same time, creating an abundance of hazardous noise. Under OSHA rules, the permissible exposure limit for noise in the construction industry is 90 decibels, measured as an 8-hour time-weighted average. At that level, employers are required to provide a hearing conservation program for workers. The following are elements that can help employers in the construction industry implement an effective hearing conservation program.

Noise monitoring

Hearing conservation starts with noise exposure monitoring. The traditional method is to use either a sound level meter to measure sound intensity at a specific moment, or a dosimeter to measure a person's average noise exposure over time. Another option is to focus on the noise generated by tasks and instituting appropriate controls and/or provide hearing protection to reduce noise to an acceptable level.

Noise controls

After determining noise levels, the next step is controlling the source of the noise. In addition to administrative controls, such as limiting the amount of time workers spend using noisy equipment, employers should use relevant engineering controls on the equipment.

Hearing protection

When noise cannot be eliminated or reduced effectively, workers need to wear hearing protection. Because of the differences in people's ear canals, employers should carry a variety of styles and sizes of hearing protection. Fit testing is important to determine the actual noise reduction rating that an earplug provides for the person wearing it. The NRR can vary greatly depending on how the earplug is inserted. Comfort is a huge factor as well. It may determine whether or not the worker is willing to wear the protection. Another factor is the fear of not hearing noises that need to be heard. Recent technology can help address this concern. Electronic amplifying ear muffs make it possible for workers to communicate in noisy environments by amplifying low-level sounds (such as voices) and filtering out the hazardous noise. Employers need to seek out solutions for their own individual exposures since hearing loss is becoming more and more of a concern especially with workers compensation insurance carriers. Hearing loss can be very expensive and add to the high costs of running a business. Costs that can ruin a company's competitive edge.

