

Physical Agent Data Sheet (PADS)

Noise

Description

Sound is created when a vibrating source (like a bell, motor or a stereo speaker) sends sound waves through the air to your ear. Every sound has two aspects: its pitch (frequency) and its loudness (intensity). On a stereo, frequency is determined by the bass/treble control. Intensity is determined by the volume control. Noise (unwanted sound) is usually made up of many frequencies. The disturbing and harmful effects of noise depend both on the loudness and the frequency of the tones making up noise.

Loudness is measured in units called decibels (dB). A conversational voice is about 65 dB. A shout is 90 dB or greater.

Frequency is measured in units called Hertz (Hz). The frequency of a locomotive horn is about 250 Hz. The frequency of a table saw is about 4,000 Hz.

Health Effects

Excessive noise can destroy the ability to hear, and may also put stress on other parts of the body, including the heart.

For most effects of noise, there is no cure, so that prevention of excessive noise exposure is the only way to avoid health damage.

Hearing

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 sounds.

Noise may tire out the inner ear, causing temporary hearing loss. After a period of time away from the noise hearing may be restored. Some workers who suffer temporary hearing loss may find that by the time their hearing returns to normal, it is time for another work shift so, in that sense, the problem is "permanent."

With continual noise exposure, the ear will lose its ability to recover from temporary hearing loss, and the damage will become permanent. Permanent hearing loss results from the destruction of cells in the inner ear, cells which can never be replaced or repaired. Such damage can be caused by long-term exposure to loud noise or, in some cases" by brief exposures to very loud noises.

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.

Workers suffering from noise-induced hearing loss may also experience continual ringing in their ears,

called "tinnitus." At this time, there is no cure for tinnitus, although some doctors are experimenting with treatment.

Other Effects

Although research on the effects of noise is not complete, it appears that noise can cause quickened pulse rate, increased blood pressure and a narrowing of the blood vessels over a long period of time, these may place an added burden on the heart.

Noise may also put stress on other parts of the body by causing the abnormal secretion of hormones and tensing of the muscles.

Workers exposed to noise sometimes complain of nervousness, sleeplessness and fatigue. Excessive noise exposure also can reduce job performance and may cause high rates of absenteeism.

Permissible Exposure Limit

The Action level for noise is an average noise level of 85 dB for an eight-hour day. When employees are exposed to noise levels, which exceed the Permissible Exposure Limit, the employer must install or use engineering or administrative controls to lower the noise levels. While these controls are being designed or installed employees must wear hearing protection. If the controls still do not reduce noise exposures to below 90 dB, hearing protection must continue to be worn.

Protective Measures

Suitable hearing protectors (earplugs or muffs) must be made available at no cost to employees who are exposed to an average of 85 dB or greater for an eight-hour day. Employees must be given the opportunity to select from three different types of appropriate hearing protectors.

Hearing tests (audiometric exams) must be given to employees who are exposed to an average of 85 dB or greater for an eight-hour day. Hearing tests will show whether employees are experiencing any hearing losses. Hearing tests are also useful in showing how well the earplugs and earmuffs are working. Hearing tests must be given annually.

Employees should also receive training in the effects of noise on hearing, an explanation of the hearing tests, and instruction on the proper fitting and care of earplugs or muffs.

Noise away from work can also cause hearing loss. Hearing protectors should be worn when operating noisy equipment or tools such as chain saws, brush cutters, power lawn mowers, or when using firearms.

Refer to Alaska Administrative Code, Occupational Health and Environmental Control 04.0104 for specific regulations on Noise Exposure and Hearing Conservation Programs.