**Why is Noise an issue in the Workplace?**

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# Why is Noise an issue in the Workplace?

Due to the nature of our business we are exposed to noise. The louder the noise, the more damage it can cause. Noise and vibration can cause long-term damage to our senses.

Hearing and touch can be severely affected by exposure to excess levels of noise and vibration.

If people are having difficulty hearing what others say, or have to shout to be understood at a distance of one metre, noise levels are likely to be damaging.

## What are the Risks of Excessive Noise?

Excessive noise causes permanent damage to hearing. Loud noises can cause hearing loss either progressively, or by exposures over a long period of time.

Damage can be caused immediately by exposure to peak sound waves produced by explosive sounds such as gunfire, explosions or cartridge operated tools.

Anyone can be exposed to excessive noise levels. Those working in noisy workplaces, factories, foundries, working with power tools, plant and machinery, and in noisy environments such as road works, airports and construction sites are among those most at risk.

## Legal Duties and Obligations around Noise

As well as a moral duty on employers to protect employees and members of the public, General Health and Safety Legislation covers all employers and workplaces.

This includes protecting employees and the public from risks associated with excessive noise.

More specifically, the following regulations place duties and obligations on all employers:

The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005. These regulations require employers to take action if daily or weekly exposure to noise is at or in excess of certain Exposure Action Levels.

It is recommended employers take the following steps:

* conduct a Noise Assessment
* take steps to prevent or control the risks
* where possible, eliminate exposure to noise at source
* control exposure to noise
* provide Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
* provide information and training
* regularly monitor and review the effectiveness of the measures.

Exposure Action Values and Limit Values the Regulations specify Exposure Action Values in decibels (dB):

* lower exposure action value - daily or weekly personal noise exposure of 80dB, or a peak sound pressure of 135dB
* upper exposure action value - daily or weekly personal noise exposure of 85dB, or a peak sound pressure of 137dB.

There are also levels of noise exposure that must not be exceeded, these are called Exposure Limit Values and take into account reductions provided by hearing protection:

* daily or weekly exposure of 87dB
* peak action level - peak sound pressure of 140dB.

As a rule of thumb: The noise level is about 80dB(A) if people have to raise their voices to be heard at a distance of one metre. The noise level is about 90dB(A) if people have to shout to be heard at a distance of one metre.

Requirements for Action The Noise Assessment is the start of the process, not the end. Assessments shouldn't just be filed away but used to carry out the employer's duties to reduce the risk of hearing loss and control noise exposure.

## At the Lower Action Values, Employers Must:

* assess the noise exposure
* eliminate noise exposure at source or reduce to a minimum level
* provide information instruction and training on risks and how to minimise risk, including how they can obtain hearing protection
* ensure that all necessary maintenance is carried out to hearing protection and equipment.

## At the Upper Action Values, Employers Must also:

* mark hearing protection zones with prominent notices
* provide everyone exposed with suitable hearing protection and ensure that it is worn.

## Assessing and Controlling Noise Risks

As a nicenstripy franchisee you should assess noise levels to find out whether or not they are at or above the action values and to identify problem areas or procedures. This will allow controls to be prioritised. A competent person should carry out Noise Assessments.

As an employer must first try and eliminate or reduce exposure to noise by means other than hearing protection.

Methods of reducing noise in working environments often require more than one solution, as noise will be produced from a number of sources.

Until methods to reduce noise levels using engineering or procedural controls have been identified, the employer should provide hearing protection as a first step. This will allow investigation of the suitability of other controls.

## Good Practice

Reducing and eliminating sources of noise

There are many ways to reduce noise levels.

Introduce the methods that protect the maximum number of those exposed first.

Control measures include:

* implementing a quieter way of doing the work
* using quieter pieces of equipment
* introducing a low-noise purchasing policy for new equipment
* improving maintenance procedures – good maintenance can reduce noise from friction and moving parts.
* fitting silencers to exhausts
* limiting access by keeping people out of noisy areas
* limiting time spent in noisy areas.

## Hearing Protection

Hearing protection should only be considered as a temporary measure, or as a last resort where a risk remains after steps have been taken to reduce noise levels.

As an employer you should make hearing protection available where noise levels are between the lower and upper action values.

Where noise exposure exceeds the upper action value, employers must:

* provide hearing protection to everyone exposed, and ensure it is used
* identify Hearing Protection Zones with signs to show where hearing protection must be worn
* provide information, instruction and training on how to use and take care of hearing protection
* make sure that hearing protection is properly maintained.

Hearing protection comes in two main types – those that are inserted in the ear and those that cover the ear. The Noise Assessment should indicate which is most suitable for each situation.

As a guide, in-ear plugs can reduce the noise level by 10-15 dB(A) and ear muffs by 20-25 dB(A), provided that they are fitted correctly.

Hearing protection should be suitable for the working environment and compatible with other items of Personal Protective Equipment. Employers should carry out regular checks to ensure it is being worn properly and is still in good condition.

## Hearing Checks (Health Surveillance)

Health surveillance in the form of hearing checks should be carried out if there is a risk that noise levels could damage hearing. This will warn of any employees who may be suffering from early symptoms of hearing loss. It also allows employers to check that noise controls are adequate.

Hearing checks should be conducted by a competent person where employees are regularly exposed to noise levels above the action values.

Once a baseline figure for each employee has been obtained, regular checks should be carried out on their hearing. The interval between hearing checks will depend on a number of factors, including the level of risk and whether the checks show that hearing loss is evident.

It is good practice to carry out hearing checks for new employees in noisy workplaces.