

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY (NOISE) REGULATIONS 1992

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Health effects of noise

Noise induced hearing loss can occur from excessive exposure to noise, the amount of which will depend on the level and noise of noise and to some extent the frequency. In some cases the hearing loss will be temporary, however if the noise is continuous and excessive the hearing mechanism in the inner ear can become damaged and the hearing loss will become permanent.

Hearing loss may not be apparent for up to twenty years and sometimes can be accompanied by tinnitus, a continuous ringing in the ears. The susceptibility to hearing loss varies from person to person and is often gradual in its onset. Most people will suffer some hearing loss with age. Noise induced hearing loss adds to the age related hearing loss and can lead to difficulty in communicating and ultimately social isolation.

There is no treatment or cure for the permanent damage and consequently controlling or reducing sources of noise in the workplace is the most effective way to prevent noise induced hearing loss.

1.2 Regulations and Code of Practice

On 1 July 1992 the Occupational Health and Safety (Noise) Regulations came into effect. The primary objectives of the Regulations are to reduce the incidence and severity of noise induced hearing loss in the workplace; to require employers to assess and control risk arising from exposure of employees to noise in the workplace; and to reduce the exposure of employees to noise. The major provisions of the Regulations are:

1. The acceptable level of noise exposure is less than the 8 hour equivalent sound level of 85 dB(A) and a peak sound level of 140 dB
2. Assessment of noise exposure must not take into account hearing protection devices worn by employees; and
3. Where practicable, employers are required to control excessive noise by using engineering controls. From 1 July 1997, administrative controls and hearing protection can only be used if engineering controls are impracticable or insufficient to reduce the noise levels to below the exposure standard.

The Victorian Government has also published a prescribed Code of Practice on Noise to provide practical guidance in meeting the requirements of the Regulations in identifying and controlling noise exposure risks. A copy of the Code of Practice is held in the Occupational Health and Safety Section, David Myers Building, Bundoora Campus.

The term "Code of Practice" has a particular meaning under the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Although failure to meet the provisions of the Code of Practice does not in itself constitute a breach of the regulations in proceedings under the Act, the onus is on employers to demonstrate that compliance with regulations is achieved in some way other than shown in the Code of Practice.

Employers must consult with the health and safety representative of a designated work group when undertaking risk identification and assessment or when there is a proposed change to the workplace that may affect the health or safety of any member of the designated work group.

The Regulations also impose obligations on designers, manufacturers, importers and suppliers to ensure that control of noise levels by suitable design and the provision of information to the purchaser.

2. RISK ASSESSMENT AND CONTROL

2.1 Assessment of exposure to noise

The regulations require employers to identify if there is a risk to employees from exposure to noise and to make an assessment of the noise exposure where the exposure standard may be exceeded. An assessment must be performed at least every five years and be undertaken by a person capable of performing the assessment correctly, taking into account the following factors:

- the plant in use at the workplace and the manner in which it is used
- the layout and condition of the workplace environment
- any available information on the noise emission and sound power of the plant
- the exposure of employees to noise
- the systems of work
- any other factors considered to be relevant

If the assessment identifies that the exposure standard may be exceeded, a written plan of action to control the noise must be developed within six months of the assessment. The Code of Practice provides guidance in preparing the action plan which must be based on a strict hierarchy of engineering controls, administrative measures or hearing protection devices where practicable.

The Occupational Health and Safety Section can provide specialist advice in conducting noise risk assessments and the preparation of action plans and where necessary can also conduct preliminary assessments.

2.2 New plant and workplaces

Employers are required to ensure that the design and construction of a new workplace or the use of new plant will prevent employee from being exposed to noise levels, which exceed the exposure standard. Furthermore, employers must ensure that plant installation, maintenance and use of plant is performed whilst having regard to any relevant information available by the manufacturer, importer or supplier.

3. HEARING PROTECTION AREAS

3.1 Marking of zones

A hearing protection area is one in which there is a potential for persons to be exposed to noise levels in excess of the exposure standard. Some examples are:

- An area in which the noise levels exceed the exposure standard but which are controlled by administrative means or hearing protection devices
- An area in which noise levels are normally below the exposure standard but may from time to time exceed the standard, for example temporary installations.

Hearing protection areas must be clearly identified by suitable signs such as the standard hearing protection warning symbol specified in Australian Standard 1319 and the boundaries clearly defined. It is expected that the School or Department will maintain a register of designated areas and persons working within to ensure that the Regulations are complied with.

4. HEARING PROTECTIVE DEVICES

Although the use of personal hearing protection devices will be a last resort, there may be occasions when they are the only practical means of reducing noise exposure. In these cases, it is important to select the appropriate device for the workplace. For example, too much sound attenuation may result in warning sounds becoming inaudible to the wearer.

The selection of the appropriate hearing protector is normally a specialist matter and the advice of the Occupational Health and Safety Section should be sought before purchase. Suppliers of hearing protectors are required to provide information about the sound reduction provided and will usually advise on the correct device for the type of workplace.

5. AUDIOMETRIC TESTING

The Regulations require that all employees who are required to wear hearing protectors undergo audiometric testing within three months of commencing employment and at least every two years thereafter.

Testing can be arranged through the University Health Service (telephone extn 2967) for a nominal charge. The results of testing will be made available to the Occupational Health and Safety Section. Although individual results are not released to departments, if the results of audiometric testing reveals that noise induced hearing loss may have occurred then the exposure assessments and controls must be reviewed.

6. TRAINING

Where an employee's exposure to noise is likely to exceed the exposure standard, the employer must provide suitable training to:

- The employees likely to be exposed to noise levels which exceed the standard
- The supervisors of persons identified above; and
- Employees who are responsible for the selection and maintenance of hearing protectors

Training must be provided to a new employee on commencement and to employees required to wear hearing protectors. The Code of Practice details the level of training to be provided.

7. FURTHER INFORMATION

Further information and advice can be obtained from the Occupational Health and Safety Section, Room W137, David Myers Building, Bundoora Campus (Telephone 9479 2186). The OH&S Section also has copies of various legislation and publications.

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