

GUIDANCE ON HEARING PROTECTION

Introduction

The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005 applies to almost all work activities. They require employers to prevent or reduce risks to health and safety from exposure to noise at work. The Regulations require exposure to hazardous noise to be reduced so far as is “reasonably practicable” - this must be achieved primarily by reducing the production of noise, and then by reducing exposure to it.

Under the University’s Code of Practice on Control of Noise at Work, hearing protection is only acceptable where technical and organisational measures cannot reduced the noise exposure further to below the action levels in the Regulations or as a short-term measure while other methods of controlling noise are being developed.

Potentially hazardous noise exposure is generally incidental to carrying out an activity, for example use of process equipment, power tools or hand tools. The University has identified a number of teaching, research and support activities and areas with potentially significant noise exposures of this type. These include: Faculty workshops e.g. design, technology and engineering workshops; maintenance workshops; plant rooms; IT server rooms; and the main reprographics room. The Health & Safety Unit carries out and/or arranges noise surveys at least every two years. Few areas/activities in the University have been identified as requiring hearing protection to be made available or provided.

Under the University’s Code of Practice on Control of Noise, Faculty Operating Officers and Directors of Directorates with such areas must:

- Provide suitable hearing protection to workers (staff and students), on request, where the personal noise exposure is between the lower and upper exposure action values (see definition of these values below)
- Designate and provide signage for hearing protection zones, and for ‘hearing protection machines’ where necessary, where exposure to workers (staff and students) is equal to or exceeds the upper exposure action value.
- Keep a record of all workers (staff and students) exposed to noise levels exceeding the upper exposure action value.
- Inform workers (staff and students) where the personal noise exposure is above the upper exposure action value and provide relevant information.
- Provide suitable hearing protection to workers (staff and students) in designated hearing protection zones, and require and supervise its wearing.
- Where hearing protection is provided (on request or mandatory), provide suitable training and instruction on correct fitting, maintenance and suitable storage.

- Where hearing protection is mandatory, provide suitable supervision to ensure rules are followed and hearing protection is being used properly. Where necessary, the University's disciplinary procedures should be followed.
- Refer employees to the Occupational Health and Wellbeing Service for health surveillance (hearing checks) if they are likely to be regularly exposed above the upper exposure action values, or are at risk for any reason e.g. they already suffer from hearing loss or are particularly sensitive to damage.

Noise Exposure Action Values and Limit Values

The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005 requires specific action at certain action values and set maximum values which must not be exceeded:

- **Lower exposure action value**
 - exposure averaged over a working day or week of 80 dB
 - maximum noise exposure (peak sound pressure) in a working day of 135 dB
- **Upper exposure action value**
 - daily or weekly exposure of 85 dB
 - peak sound pressure of 137 dB
- **Exposure limit values – Must not be exceeded**
 - daily or weekly exposure of 87 dB
 - peak sound pressure of 140 dB

These exposure limit values take account of any reduction in exposure provided by hearing protection, i.e. the values are the noise experienced at the ear.

Suitable hearing protection

Hearing protection is either ear defenders that are worn over the ear or ear plugs that fit into the ear. They may be fitted to the individual or one-size and must provide the required level of protection. Ear plugs may be disposable for single or short-term use.

- Make sure the protectors give enough protection – aim to get below 85 dB at the ear.
- Make sure the protectors do not cut out too much noise – it must be possible to hear alarms and emergency instructions. Cutting out too much sound can also make the wearer feel isolated and be unwilling to wear them.
- Don't have a 'blanket' approach and make the wearing of protectors compulsory where the law doesn't require it.
- Target the use of protectors to the noisy tasks and jobs in a working day, and only where they are really needed.
- If you make it compulsory it will have to be enforced, so it isn't to be done lightly.
- Select protectors which are suitable for the working environment – consider how comfortable and hygienic they are.
- Think about how they will be worn with other protective equipment, e.g. hard hats, dust masks and eye protection.
- Provide a range of protectors that will provide the required level of protection so that individuals can choose ones which suit them.
- Provide individuals with their own protection; sharing is not appropriate.

Maintenance, cleaning and storage

Non-disposable hearing protection needs to continue to work effectively, so checks will be needed to ensure that:

- It remains in good, clean condition.
- Earmuff seals are undamaged.
- The tension of the headband is not reduced.
- There are no unofficial modifications.
- Compressible earplugs are soft, pliable and clean.
- It is kept in clean storage when not in use, not just left on the bench or the equipment.

Information, instruction and training

It is important that all workers (staff and students) understand the risks to which they may be exposed. All workers provided with hearing protection, and particularly those who are required to use it (where noise levels exceed the upper exposure action value), need induction and periodic refresher information, instruction and training on:

- The likely noise exposure and risk to their hearing this creates.
- The local arrangements to control noise production and noise exposures.
- Their duties under the University Code of Practice on Control of Noise at Work.
- When and how they can request hearing protection.
- When and where they are required to wear hearing protection – appropriate signage should be displayed to make this clear.
- The types of hearing protection available to them, and how and where to obtain it.
- The proper way to fit and wear the hearing protection.
- The proper way to use any noise reduction equipment.
- The correct procedures for cleaning, maintenance and storage of hearing protection.
- How to report defects in hearing protection, and also in any noise reduction equipment such as silencers and enclosures.
- Any health surveillance (hearing checks) arranged by the University's Occupational Health and Wellbeing Service that they need to attend.

Supervision

Where the use of hearing protection is mandatory, above the upper exposure action value, workers are required to wear it. Supervisors should carry out spot checks to see that the rules are being followed and that hearing protection is being used properly. Where necessary, disciplinary procedures should be followed.

Managers and supervisors also need to set a good example by wearing hearing protection at all times when in hearing protection zones. Any visitors should also be required to wear hearing protection.

Managers and supervisors should also ensure that the only people in hearing protection zones are the ones who need to be there, and make sure they do not stay longer than necessary.

Health surveillance

Health surveillance is provided by the University's Occupational Health and Wellbeing Service. It must be provided to employees who are likely to be regularly exposed above the upper exposure action values, or are at risk for any reason e.g. they already suffer from hearing loss or are particularly sensitive to damage.

Health surveillance warns when employees might be suffering from early signs of hearing damage and gives the opportunity to take action to prevent the damage getting worse. This will include checking that existing control measures are working as planned, and identifying improvements. Results can help with targeting noise reduction and noise exposure measures, and worker training and supervision.

Health surveillance usually means:

- regular hearing checks in controlled conditions, ideally starting before the employee is exposed to noise, i.e. new starters and when changing jobs, then every two to three years (or more frequently if any problem is detected or where the risk of damage is high);
- keeping health records (health surveillance and fitness-for-work advice);
- telling employees about the results of their hearing checks and making their own records available to them. Confidential medical records will only be held by medical personnel, and will not be shared without the employees consent;
- ensuring employees are examined by a doctor where hearing damage is identified;
- providing information so that risk assessments can be reviewed and arrangements revised if necessary.