



Noise Induced Hearing Loss

The HSE estimates that, in the UK, over 2 million people are exposed to noise levels that may be harmful, and around 170 thousand people suffer deafness, tinnitus or other ear conditions as a result of exposure to excessive noise at work. The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005, in force as of April 2006, came about in part due to medical evidence suggestive that people are prone to damage from continuous noise levels lower than previously thought. While often considered an historical concern, QBE have experienced an upturn in claim frequency and severity since 2001. While employers' compliance with the 2005 Regulations should result in more protection for employees, conversely the lowering of noise action levels mean that, in theory, the hurdle for establishing liability in civil claims has fallen.

MINIMUM STANDARDS

1. A noise risk assessment is carried out by a competent person, recognising that noise assessment and control is a specialist discipline. Where competence is not available internally, advice should be sought from a specialist professional.
2. A hierarchical and 'risk based' approach is adopted to avoid and reduce risks. Efforts concentrate on reduction at source e.g. via purchasing policies and engineering controls.
3. Hearing protection is employed as a last resort in the hierarchy of control options. Where required, hearing protection is suitable and is confirmed to achieve the required attenuation.
4. Where required, there is documentary evidence that the wearing of hearing protection is effectively supervised, enforced and audited in accordance with safety rules. Non-compliances are recorded with offending employees subject to coaching &/or disciplinary procedure.
5. Employees regularly exposed to noise levels of 85 dB (A) or higher are subject to health surveillance, including audiometric testing. Where exposure is between the Action Values or sporadic above the upper exposure action values, employees are included where it is known that they are particularly sensitive or predisposed to NIHL.

BEST PRACTISE

- Noise control is recognised and managed as an engineering discipline, rather than solely a health and safety concern.
- Insured's involve their purchasing department and, in consultation with their competent person, consult machinery and equipment suppliers in order to achieve and exceed best practise standards in relation to noise. This may be in the form of a 'buy quiet' purchasing policy.
- 'Safe place' and 'safe person' strategies are adopted where noise cannot reasonably practicably be reduced below safe levels. This involves isolating the noise source itself or moving/separating employees from the noise.
- Accurate historical records are continually documented including:-
 - Areas and dates worked, cross referenced to noise assessment/noise map
 - Personal exposure levels (personal dose)
 - Records of the provision & attenuation of hearing protection
 - Records of information, instruction and training provided to the employee
 - Pre/para/exit employment audiometry results
 - Evidence of disciplinary action for non-compliance

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005 is the main provision here. They set noise action values above which employers and employees need to take action. Employers are required to conduct a risk assessment with a view to eliminating risk at source and then reducing residual risk as low as reasonably practicable. Where the risk cannot be reduced adequate hearing protection should be provided.

GUIDANCE & USEFUL INFORMATION

- HSE Website – Noise Pages and free leaflets: www.hse.gov.uk/noise/
- QBE: Noise Issues Forum (July 2006)

For further information contact RM@UK.qbe.com