



HOW TO OVERCOME THE TOP THREE OBJECTIONS TO WEARING HEARING PROTECTION

There are a number of reasons why workers ignore advice on wearing hearing protection, ranging from lack of motivation to uncomfortable fit, but the end result is always the same. When exposed to high decibel noise without appropriate protective measures, hearing suffers. And, as noise-induced hearing loss is often gradual, the full extent of the damage may only be discovered years later. That's why motivating workers to take responsibility for protecting their hearing is key to eliminating the issue.

1 NOISE DOESN'T AFFECT ME, I'M USED TO IT

Some workers don't believe they are susceptible to noise damage. New starters and seasoned employees with decades of experience in the industry are equally likely to think that noise does not affect them, especially if they have no symptoms. Unfortunately, while the brain may perceptually grow accustomed to constant noise, ears are anatomically unable to simply 'toughen up'. They respond to loud noise the only way they can: by losing hearing.

SOLUTION: Provide workers with hard facts about hearing loss and how it can affect them personally. Show them their personal audiogram results next to an audiogram from someone suffering from hearing loss. The message is clear: you need to protect your hearing now so that your audiogram doesn't look like this in a few years' time.

In order for workers to be motivated by audiograms and noise maps, however, they must first understand them. Each worker should receive a minimum level of training in understanding how different decibel levels might affect them. You can also use educational tools around the workplace to raise awareness of on the importance of hearing protection or highlight the level of noise related to the level of damage. This can help constantly remind workers that they are in a noisy environment. Only then can they put their own audiogram results in the context of the workplace noise and take steps to protect their hearing.

2 I'LL DEAL WITH IT LATER

Some workers prefer to concentrate on risks occurring 'here and now' and don't see something that might affect them in the distant future as a priority. This way of thinking can have devastating results. Noise-induced hearing loss usually develops over years of exposure and the full extent of the damage might not be experienced until years later.

SOLUTION: Show workers what their future will be like if they don't protect their hearing. You can use audio demonstrations to simulate what a person affected by NIHL actually hears. The results are often quite a shock to those listening because, contrary to common belief, people suffering from NIHL often notice a change in the clarity of the words spoken, not the volume. As NIHL typically affects high-frequency hearing, sufferers have a problem hearing high-frequency sounds of speech (such as consonants) and so all speech sounds garbled. You can simulate this by playing a speech sample on any sound system with the treble level turned down to a minimum.

3 HEARING PROTECTION DEVICES DON'T FIT ME AND MAKE IT HARDER FOR ME TO DO MY JOB

As earplugs and earmuffs are something workers might wear throughout their working day, they have to fit properly. If the hearing protection offered is uncomfortable or affects job performance, workers are unlikely to wear it consistently, putting their hearing at risk. Similarly, if the hearing protection makes it harder for them to hear colleagues or vital sounds such as alarms, workers might experience a feeling of isolation and be more likely to take it off.

SOLUTION: Ensure workers have access to protection that is fit for purpose and meets their individual needs. There is a wide range of hearing protection products currently available so every worker should be able to find a solution that works for them. The latest hearing protection products for example offer optimum comfort and filter out harmful environmental noise, whilst still allowing the wearer to hear conversation and critical sounds such as alarms.

While finding hearing protection that fits well is important, it is also important to make sure the worker understands why the fit matters. Fit-testing is a useful tool here because it enables each worker to see for themselves how well they are protected and if their other PPE interferes with their choice of hearing protection, compromising its effectiveness. It's also worth explaining the latest regulations to workers.

Overall, setting the right expectations and mindset in the work environment by raising awareness of NIHL is key to ensuring good hearing health. It is also worth bearing in mind that while hearing protection, even when fitted correctly, may sometimes seem uncomfortable, it is much more comfortable than living with noise-induced hearing loss for the rest of your life.