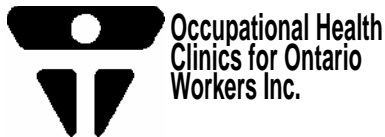


## Community

# Take precautions to protect hearing

By Lorraine Wakely  
GUEST COLUMNIST



Noise. It is not a new hazard, but, to many of us, it's one that seems to be becoming more common.

"Work-related hearing loss is one of the most common occupational diseases in the United States," says Dr. Linda Rosenstock, director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).

NIOSH estimates that more than 30 million workers are exposed to hazardous noise levels on a daily basis and more than 10 million workers suffer from noise-induced hearing loss.

While hearing loss is the best-known effect of noise, it is not the only effect. Constant loud noise can also cause tinnitus (ringing in the ears), interfere with communication and the ability to hear warning signals, disrupt job performance, increase annoyance, increase stress and reduce productivity.

Under most circumstances, protecting your hearing also protects you from these other effects.

Noise is measured in decibels. A normal conversation is about 60 decibels. A woodshop noise level is about 100 decibels, and chainsaw noise measures about 110 decibels. Prolonged exposure to noise above 85 decibels can cause hearing loss.

Loud noise causes hearing loss by damaging the delicate hair cells in the inner ear. This damage usually happens gradually when we are exposed to loud sounds over a long period of time.

A short, intense sound, like an explosion, can cause immediate temporary hearing loss.

But usually, hearing loss occurs so gradually that you don't realize it's happening. Over time, sounds may simply become muffled or distorted. Tinnitus, a ringing or roaring sound in one or both ears, can accompany both immediate and gradual hearing loss.

Hearing loss is progressive if you continue to be exposed to noise.

Today you may have a minor hearing loss, but after further exposure, the loss becomes more severe. However, once you stop the exposure, the hearing loss won't get worse.

The first step in dealing with noise is to identify where there is excessive noise.

If you answer yes to any of these questions, then you may have a noise problem.

1. Is the noise so loud that you have to raise your voice significantly for someone at an arm's length away to hear you?

2. When you're in a quieter environment, do your ears feel plugged or do you hear a mild ringing or whooshing noise that goes away after an hour or two?

If you answer yes to either of these questions, take some sound advice: Get your hearing tested and protect your ears.

Unfortunately, good hearing is usually taken for granted until it is lost.

Hearing loss may be so gradual that individuals do not realize what has happened until it becomes a handicap. The gradual, progressive loss of communication and sensitivity to sound is hard to notice.

One of the first signs of hearing loss is a feeling that other people do not speak as clearly as they used to.

Noise-induced hearing loss is fully preventable. But once acquired, it's permanent and irreversible. We should all take every preventive measure possible to preserve and protect our hearing.

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