

Casualty Risk Solutions

Hearing loss caused by exposure to noise at work continues to be a significant occupational disease. According to the HSE over 1 million employees in Great Britain are exposed to levels of noise which put their hearing at risk. Claims frequencies have increased significantly in recent years.

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. Whilst often considered an historical concern, civil claims presented where there is a 'correct' diagnosis of noise induced hearing loss (NIHL) often succeed due to the lack of any contrary evidence to suggest that the injury was not work related or that noise levels were properly assessed, managed or controlled. While employers' compliance with the 2005 Regulations should result in more protection for employees, conversely the lowering of noise action levels mean that the hurdle for establishing liability in civil claims has fallen.



Best practice standards

✓	A noise risk assessment is carried out by a competent person, recognising that noise assessment and control should be recognised as an engineering discipline, rather than solely a health and safety concern. Where competence is not available internally, advice should be sought from an external specialist.	✓	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.
✓	A hierarchical and 'risk based' approach is adopted to avoid and reduce risks. Efforts concentrate on reduction at source and engineering controls. Guided by the competent person, the purchasing department should 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.	✓	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.
✓	'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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Areas and dates worked, cross referenced to noise assessments and noise maps • Personal exposure levels (personal dose) • Records of the provision & attenuation of hearing protection • Records of information, instruction and training provided to individual employees • Pre/para/exit employment audiometry results • Evidence of the disciplinary regime and specific disciplinary action for non-compliance.
✓	Hearing protection is deployed as the last resort in the hierarchy of control options. Where required, hearing protection is suitable and validated to achieve the required attenuation.		



Legal requirements

The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005 is the main provision here, setting 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 noise levels cannot reasonably be reduced by other methods adequate hearing protection and information, instruction and training should be provided to employees.

Guidance and useful information

- HSE: Web Pages www.hse.gov.uk/noise
- Noise at work: Guidance for employers on the Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005. www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg362.pdf
- QBE: Noise Issues Forum.

Further information

For more information please visit: www.QBEurope.com/rs
or email us on RS@uk.qbe.com

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