

## *Noise on the job*

Have you ever been in an extremely loud setting and asked someone who regularly works there, "How do you put up with this noise?" The shouted reply might be "I've gotten used to it."

People who are exposed to loud noise for extended periods of time do become accustomed to it because of a gradual hearing loss resulting in a reduced sense of volume. Growing accustomed to noise is only one symptom of hearing loss. Others are ringing ears after exposure to loud noise, or the impression that other people frequently mumble as they speak. In addition to hearing loss, constant exposure to loud noise can cause high blood pressure, irritability and other symptoms of stress.

There is a difference between sound and noise. Noise is defined as sounds we prefer not to hear. Noises don't have to be loud to be irritating. For example, during a quiet, sleepless night, the sound of a dripping faucet can be as irritating as a diesel truck.

But high-volume noise can have a dangerous impact on the inner ear's capacity for hearing. Exposure to loud noise over an extended period of time will eventually destroy a person's hearing. This fact is especially important for those of us who work daily with loud noise.

Sound is measured by decibels. A whisper is about 20 decibels, while voices in a normal conversation range from 69 to 70 decibels. A diesel truck and a power lawn mower both register at about 95 decibels, the level at which noise can damage hearing. At 117 decibels, a pneumatic drill can cause pain to unprotected ears.

Today, millions of people are exposed to hazardous noise on and off the job. In the workplace, machinery often produces noise above 85 decibels. At that level of exposure employers are required to administer a program of hearing conservation, which includes efforts to reduce the noise, regular monitoring of the noise level, hearing tests for employees and the provision of hearing protection devices to workers with prolonged exposure to 85 decibels or more.

Annual hearing tests can help determine which workers are experiencing hearing loss. By comparing test results over a period of years, serious hearing conditions can be diagnosed and treated.

The University of Arkansas has a hearing conservation program. We also provide hearing protection to all employees and visitors in high noise areas. You must use this protection as needed, to ensure that you do not suffer hearing loss. If you have any questions on this feel free to call Environmental Health and Safety.

Fortunately, a noisy environment does not have to be an unsafe one. And you can do your part in preserving your hearing by being careful about off-the-job exposures to high-volume noise as well.