

## **Your Hearing: Keep it for a Lifetime**

Most of us go through life taking our senses for granted. Like touching, tasting, smelling, and seeing; hearing is something we do automatically, without giving it much thought. But when something goes wrong with any of our senses, including our hearing, we expect that medical science has a miracle to offer. Unfortunately, medicine offers only moderate improvement for people with hearing loss. Hearing loss cannot be restored for most people. Lots of people suffer some degree of hearing loss. Farmers, construction workers, people exposed to constant loud noise on the job, whether at home or through their hobbies (even fans of loud music!), have at least one thing in common. They are at risk of permanent hearing loss. This week's **Safety Topic** looks at hearing loss and how it can be prevented.

Exposure to normal noise levels doesn't cause hearing loss. Hearing loss occurs because of overexposure to high noise levels. Noise is measured in units called "decibels." The higher the decibel, the louder the noise. To help you see the difference in the decibel scale, look at these examples of various noise levels:

- 20 - decibels soft whisper**
- 30 - leaves rustling, very soft music**
- 60 - normal speech, background music**
- 85 - heavy machinery with soundproof cab**
- 90 - lawnmower, shop tools**
- 100 - heavy machinery without soundproof cab, motorcycles**
- 115 - loud music, sand blasting**
- 140 - jet engine, shotgun**

In the workplace, hearing protection must be used to reduce noise exposure for any one who is generally exposed to 85 decibels or more over the course of their workday. Hearing protection may be used at lower levels, particularly for people who are very close to the 85 decibel exposure level. Sounds above 120 decibels can cause hearing damage after only a brief exposure and should be avoided unless hearing protection is worn.

Speaking of hearing protection, you've probably seen lots of different types. Keep in mind that not every type of hearing protection is good for every type of noise. Disposable foam earplugs may be fine for some noise exposure. Earmuff-type protection may be suitable for another.

It is the University's responsibility to assess noise exposures and provide appropriate hearing protection as needed for everyone in the workplace. If you have questions about the noise level that you are exposed to, contact EH&S. They have the equipment to take noise level readings. It is the worker's responsibility to use the protection consistently and correctly. Hearing protection is no use if it's not worn.

Another thing that might cause unnecessary noise exposure is poorly-maintained equipment. Keeping equipment properly lubricated and in good condition helps keep down the noise. If you become aware of noisy equipment that hasn't been noisy before, report the condition so proper hearing protection can be provided until necessary repairs are made.

Away from the workplace hearing protection is your total responsibility. Don't risk your hearing for the sake of a hobby. Keep the music at a reasonable level. It may be hard to admit, but if other people tell you your stereo is too loud, it probably is! If you ride a motorcycle or another noisy vehicle, protect your hearing. In your workshop, use hearing protection that's appropriate to protect against the noise. You can do something to help protect your hearing. Take the time to know what protection to use and use it faithfully. Your hearing can last a lifetime with a few common-sense precautions.