Guard Your Hearing on the Job Site

Although we may not often think about it, our ability to hear is a valuable asset. We hear soft, pleasant sounds such as whispers and music, and we hear loud noises such as those made by heavy equipment. With our ears, we register sounds and pass this information along to our brain. Regrettably, our ears cannot regulate sound levels, and excessive exposure to loud noise can irreversibly damage the ability to hear. One in 10 Americans has a hearing loss that affects his or her ability to understand normal speech.

People vary in their sensitivity to noise. However, as a rule, noise might be damaging to your hearing if you have to shout over background noise to make yourself heard, the noise hurts your ears or makes them ring, or you have difficulty hearing for several hours after exposure to the noise.

Loudness (or sound intensity) is measured in decibels. A whisper measures about 20 decibels, while an average speaking voice is usually around 60 decibels. A shop saw measures at about 100 decibels, and a jet engine is a loud 140 decibels! It is considered hazardous to your hearing to expose your ears to 85 decibels or greater for lengthy periods of time.

More than sixteen million American workers are exposed to noise on the job that can result in hearing loss. The best way to prevent this loss is to wear hearing protection on the job site. There are two main types of protection available. Earplugs fit in the outer ear canal and should be fit properly in order to ensure a proper seal. They come in a variety of sizes and shapes and offer the best protection against low frequency noise.

Earmuffs are a second option. Earmuffs fit over the entire outer ear with an adjustable headband. They offer the best protection against high frequency noise. Either type of protection reduces noise levels by 15 to 30 decibels. If both types are worn together, you can add another 10 to 15 decibels of protection.

Your protective equipment is only effective when you wear it consistently, and when you make sure it fits properly. Studies reveal that about half of the workers wearing hearing protectors receive one-half or less of the noise reduction potential of their protectors because these devices are not worn continuously while in noise or because they do not fit properly. Deciding to remove your earmuffs or earplugs for just 1 hour over an 8 hour work day and exposing your ears to loud noise can reduce your 30 decibel protection to only 9 decibels.

Remember that hearing loss is irreversible, but fortunately, it is also preventable. It is well worth extra effort to protect your hearing in the workplace.