

Hearing Conservation

Listen up!

Certain tools and equipment, such as impact drills, air compressors, or generators, can create noisy environments in the workplace. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that about 22 million U.S. workers each year are exposed to hazardous noise levels at work. Repeated exposure to excessive noise can lead to irreversible hearing loss and other hearing impacts such as tinnitus (ringing in the ears). Northwestern's [Hearing Conservation Program](#) (HCP) aims to prevent the occurrence or reduce the progression of noise-induced hearing loss. If excessive noise is effectively controlled, you can preserve your hearing for the things you love, like music, movies, and conversations with your friends and family.

How loud is too loud?

Noise is commonly measured in A-weighted decibels (dBA). The sound of a whisper is approximately 30 dBA, a normal conversation is about 60 dBA, and an ambulance siren is 150 dBA. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) prohibits exposure above 90 dBA as an 8-hour time-weighted average. If you are exposed at or above 85 dBA, you must be enrolled in Northwestern's HCP.

Generally, if you need to shout to speak to someone three feet away, the work area is probably too loud. If you believe there may be unsafe noise levels in your work area, contact your supervisor or [Environmental Health and Safety](#) (EHS) to assess the noise levels.

Tips for Success When Talking to Your Team

Preparation is Key: Keep the topic relevant. Work with your team to review how to recognize and report potentially hazardous noise in your workplace and discuss ways to reduce it.

Stay Positive: Keep the focus on what can be done to create a safe workplace, instead of focusing on what has gone wrong in the past.

Share a Story, Ask for a Story: Storytelling is a powerful method to convey information. Stories from your employees make the topic even more relatable.

Hearing Conservation Program

You are required to be enrolled in the HCP if the noise levels in your work area exceed OSHA limits, and the EHS team will work with you to ensure all requirements are met, including:

- Annual audiometric tests for hearing loss
- Annual [Hearing Conservation Training](#) to keep you informed
- The use and care of necessary hearing protection

Hearing protection

Excessive noise in the workplace can be reduced by replacing or isolating noisy equipment or reducing the amount of time spent in noisy environments. If it is not feasible to eliminate or mitigate a source of noise, hearing protection is required. You should always use hearing protection that provides the appropriate level of protection, comfort, and compatibility with your other personal protective equipment. The two most common types of hearing protection are **ear muffs** and **ear plugs**. Work with your supervisor or contact EHS to select the [right hearing protection](#) for your work area.



Ear muffs



Banded ear plugs



Corded ear plugs

Learn more: Review Northwestern's Noise and Hearing Conservation Information [Sheet](#), OSHA's Occupational Noise Exposure [Page](#), and the CDC's Noise and Hearing Loss Prevention [Page](#).

Report all incidents to your supervisor, who should then notify Northwestern's Office of Risk Management on their [website](#) or by phone at (847) 491-5582.

Protect your hearing outside the workplace

The workplace isn't the only noisy environment you're likely to encounter. Be aware of the following sources of excessive noise and use hearing protection or avoid prolonged exposure to protect yourself and your family: Lawnmowers, snow blowers, leaf blowers, concerts and festivals, loud television and home music systems, and fireworks displays.

For Additional Information

Contact Environmental Health & Safety at ehs@northwestern.edu