Addressing Your Concerns About Hearing Protection

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Hearing loss is one of the fastest growing chronic conditions facing today's workers, affecting nearly 30 million people in the United States and Canada. While there are many causes of hearing loss, noise-induced hearing loss (NIHL) is one of the most common types and it can affect anyone who is exposed to loud sounds or noise over a long period of time, whether at work or during recreational activities.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

Hearing loss can have a profound effect on your quality of life. You might endure a permanent ringing in your ears. Sounds become distorted or muffled, making it difficult to watch TV or hold a conversation. There are also psychological effects that come with being unable to communicate with others, such as frustration, withdrawal and depression.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

NIHL is irreversible, but it is also preventable. To protect yourself, you need to know which noises can cause damage (those at or above 85 decibels) and you need to wear hearing protection whenever you're exposed to high noise levels.

In order for your hearing protection to do its job, you have to take good care of it so it will work properly in a crisis. And you have to wear it properly and consistently.

Unfortunately, not everyone follows these simple instructions. Why not? Usually because of misinformation. So let's address some common concerns about hearing protection.

Concern #1: *If I wear hearing protection, I won't be able to hear warning sounds or detect if a machine is not functioning properly.*

If your hearing is not damaged, then you should be able to hear warning and machinery sounds just fine, although they may sound different to you at first. If your hearing is already damaged, then hearing protection may slightly affect your ability to hear these sounds. Talk to your fitter about possibly wearing hearing aids under earmuffs.

Concern #2: *Hearing protection is uncomfortable.*

At first, you may find hearing protection to be uncomfortable. But—just like a new pair of shoes—if the device fits properly and is worn correctly, you should get used to it eventually.

Concern #3: *The noise doesn't bother me like it does other people. Am I just getting used to it?*

Sorry, but the ear does not get used to noise. If you're not being affected by loud noise then you may already be developing hearing loss. Get your hearing checked right away.

Concern #4: *Earplugs cause ear infections.*

It's unlikely, as ear infections are generally caused by a virus in the middle or inner ear, or some kind of scratch in the ear canal that might be aggravated by the earplug. When selecting your hearing protection, talk to the fitter about any conditions you have that might interfere with or be aggravated by an earplug. You may want to wear an earmuff until the condition clears up.

Concern #5: *I tried hearing protection before. It didn't work for me then, so it won't work for me now.*

Hearing protectors are only effective if they fit properly and are worn correctly. Select your hearing protection carefully and be sure to fit each ear separately. Your ear canals may differ from each other in size and shape.

FINAL WORD

Listen up! Noise-induced hearing loss is permanent. But preventing it is simple: Select the protection that's right for you and use it properly whenever you are exposed to high noise.