

Section 12: HEARING CONSERVATION PROGRAM

INTRODUCTION

Long-term exposure to excessive noise can lead to irreversible hearing loss. While noise-induced hearing loss rarely affects one's ability to "hear" speech, it can severely impair a person's ability to discriminate speech and communicate with others, leading to a profound decrease in quality of life. King County conducts a hearing conservation program as defined by WAC 296-817, "Hearing Loss Prevention (Noise), and WAC 296-802, "Employee Medical and Exposure Records." The program is designed to eliminate noise-induced hearing loss among King County employees.

APPLICABILITY

This policy applies to all employees determined to have the potential for exposure to noise levels equaling or exceeding:

- An 8-hour time-weighted average (TWA) of 85 A-weighted decibels (dBA), using a slow response noise dosimeter
- A maximum of 115 A-weighted decibels (dBA), at any time, using a slow response sound level meter
- A peak reading of 140 C-weighted decibels (dBC), at any time, using a fast response sound level meter.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Department Supervisors must ensure that:

- Employees working in high noise areas are aware of these requirements and participate in the King County Hearing Conservation Program
- Employees are provided with required training
- Appropriate hearing protection is available to employees
- Employees wear the proper hearing protection
- Employees included in the hearing conservation program have their hearing tested annually
- Administrative or engineering controls are implemented, when feasible

Employees must:

- Wear appropriate hearing protection as required
- Attend annual hearing tests and training as required

The Safety and Claims Management Office will:

- Conduct noise monitoring of work areas and specific jobs
- Determine which employees should be included in the Hearing Conservation Program
- Coordinate annual hearing testing and training

NOISE MONITORING

Noise monitoring is conducted as deemed necessary or upon request at King County work locations where it is suspected that employee exposure to noise may exceed hearing conservation criteria. Noise monitoring is performed by Safety and Health Professionals from Safety and Claims Management (206-477-3350). Noise monitoring is conducted as required by WAC 296-817-20005. All employees will be notified of their monitoring results.

NOISE CONTROL

Reasonable administrative or engineering controls are the most effective and desirable means of reducing noise exposure and must be implemented where employee 8-hour TWA exposures exceed 90 dBA. Personal hearing protective devices may be used to reduce noise exposure where engineering controls are not feasible or where the 8-hour TWA is less than 90 dBA.

Appropriate hearing protection must be used by all employees exposed to noise levels equaling or exceeding:

- An 8-hour TWA of 85 dBA, using a slow response noise dosimeter
- A maximum of 115 dBA, at any time, using a slow response sound level meter
- A peak reading of 140 dBC, at any time, using a fast response sound level meter.

Personal hearing protection (ear plugs or ear muffs) must be available at all times during the work shift to employees who are required to use hearing protection. Supervisors are responsible for maintaining an adequate supply of hearing protection devices and for ensuring that employees use them.

AUDIOMETRIC TESTING

Safety and Claims Management provides audiometric testing for all employees participating in the hearing conservation program. The testing is conducted, and the results evaluated according to WAC 296-817-400.

Baseline audiometric testing is conducted during pre-employment physical examinations, and is repeated annually for employees participating in the hearing conservation program. Records of all noise monitoring and audiometric testing results are maintained by Safety and Claims Management, and are available upon request by King County employees. Audiometric test results are considered confidential medical records, and are released to third parties only upon authorization of the employee.

Each employee whose audiometric testing results show hearing loss, as defined

in WAC 296-817, is notified in writing within twenty-one days of determination of the hearing loss. If the employee already wears hearing protection, s/he must be retrained in its use and fitted with more efficient hearing protection if necessary. If the employee does not wear hearing protection, s/he must be provided hearing protection, trained in its use, and required to wear it. Additional medical testing, if necessary, is performed at no cost to the employee.

WARNING SIGNS

Work areas where employees may be exposed to noise levels at or above 115 dBA must be posted with warning signs. The signs indicate that the area is a "high noise area" and that hearing protection is required to be worn at all times.

EMPLOYEE TRAINING

All employees exposed to noise levels at or above 85 dBA for an 8-hour TWA must be given annual training that includes:

- The effects of noise on hearing (including both occupational and non-occupational exposures), and early signs of noise-induced hearing loss.
- Noise controls used in the workplace.
- The purpose of hearing protection: The advantages, disadvantages, and Noise Reduction Ratings (NRR) of various types.
- Instructions about selecting, fitting, using, and caring for hearing protection.
- The purpose and procedures for program evaluation including audiometric testing.
- The employees' right to access records kept by Safety and Claims Management.

QUESTIONS

The potential for overexposure to harmful noise associated with a given job can be determined by a noise survey. If you have any questions, contact Safety and Claims Management at 206-477-3350.