

## WORKING WITH HEARING LOSS

### Hearing Impairment, Noise, and Job Safety/Performance

Employers are responsible for ensuring a safe workplace. In many workplaces good hearing is important for workers to do their job correctly. However, workers also may need to hear sounds that warn of imminent danger. The BC *Occupational Health & Safety Regulation, Part 4.19, General Conditions* (physical or mental impairment) would include hearing loss as a physical impairment, as follows:

1. “A worker with a physical or mental impairment which may affect the worker’s ability to safely perform assigned work must inform his or her supervisor or employer of the impairment, and must not knowingly do work where the impairment may create an undue risk to the worker or anyone else, and
2. A worker must not be assigned to activities where a reported or observed impairment may create an undue risk to the worker or anyone else.”

However, employers also have a legal obligation to make adjustments in the workplace for workers with certain, specified disabilities, such as hearing loss. This “duty to accommodate” is a part of the law (Human Rights Act of BC) that prohibits discrimination in the workplace on the basis of “protected characteristics”, including physical disability. **Hearing loss is a protected disability.** Under the law an employer has a duty to reasonably accommodate this disability up to the point of “undue hardship”. To be relieved of this obligation, an employer would need to show that “accommodation of the needs of an individual affected would impose undue hardship on the person who would have to accommodate those needs, considering health, safety and cost”. With reasonable accommodation the worker must be able to safely perform the essential functions of the job without posing a direct threat in the workplace.

So, how does an employer decide if a worker with hearing loss is safe doing their job and doesn’t pose a safety risk to other workers? Employers need to look at the specific work situation to decide if an employee with hearing loss is able to function safely – particularly in noise (where they may be required to wear hearing protection) – and to meet the communication demands placed upon them at that workplace.

**Fitness and Risk Evaluation:** The following criteria should be used to determine the worker’s ability to function in a real-world work situation.

- **Physical Impairment (amount of hearing loss).** This is not accurately indicated by an industrial audiogram. It must include a complete medical and audiometric evaluation to determine the degree of impairment, if a medically treatable condition is causing the hearing impairment, and whether any physical condition precludes the proper use of hearing protection devices. A doctor should do the medical investigation; a certified audiologist should do the hearing assessment.
- **Job Communication Requirements.** What level of communication is essential for the worker’s job safety and production? This must be based on the specific job duties performed by the worker.
- **Functional Impairment.** Refers to the possible limitations a worker may experience because of a hearing impairment. Functional areas include ability to: hear normal conversation, hear in groups or background noise, ability to hear warning signals, tell direction of a sound source, wear ear protection or communication systems.
- **Workplace Safety Requirements.** What is happening at the work location that may be a safety risk if the worker doesn’t hear it? For example, forklifts, moving vehicles, warning bells or sirens, possible falling parts, audible cues for machine malfunctions.
- **On-the Job Injuries.** A low number of injuries, incidents, or close calls for an employee may indicate that he has learned to compensate in some way for his hearing impairment or that the work setting has low hazard or risk for hearing accurately.

**Most individuals work safely and productively even with an acquired hearing loss.**

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#### Hearing Protection Solutions

One accommodation strategy that should be considered by employers is to provide non-traditional hearing protection for workers in hazardous noise with communication demands and/or hearing impairment.

A number of hearing protection options exist to allow workers to function safely and effectively in noise without the risk of further hearing loss.

These include:

- lower attenuation/sound reduction, such as, Class B, or Grade 2 earplugs, earmuffs, or banded plugs,
- vented custom molded plugs or vented earmuffs,
- communication systems built into noise reducing ear plugs or muffs,
- electronic earmuffs that enhance hearing of environmental sounds as well as provide direct radio communication input,
- flat, or uniform, attenuation earplugs or muffs that provide equal sound reduction at all pitches resulting in more natural and accurate hearing.

**NOTE:** Workers should not wear hearing aids if working in hazardous noise. The hearing aids will likely amplify the already hazardous noise and cause further hearing loss. Hearing aids turned off do not usually provide enough blockage of sound to act as hearing protection, but may reduce the sound enough to prevent the worker from hearing warning signals or other essential sounds.

#### **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION (and Internet links):**

Working with Hearing Loss – A guide for employees, employers and entrepreneurs, published by the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, with support from Human Resources Development Canada, 2000. The guide **includes an extensive list of resources for additional information.** It is an excellent overview of hearing loss and strategies for making the workplace accessible. To order, contact CHHA at 1-800-263-8068 or Email: [chhanational@chha.ca](mailto:chhanational@chha.ca).

The Canadian Human Rights Commission, Guide for Barrier-Free Employers, is an excellent on-line resource at [www.chrc-ccdp.ca](http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca).

For advice about Hearing Protection Devices that allow for accommodation of hearing-impaired workers who are exposed to hazardous noise on the job check out the Hearing Loss Prevention

Topics at [www.healthandsafetycentre.org](http://www.healthandsafetycentre.org).

Contact: Hearing Loss Prevention Section at 604-276-3090 or Toll Free 1-888-621-7233, extension 3090 and ask to speak to the occupational audiologist.