HEARING CONSERVATION

Fire sprinkler installers learn early that no matter what you do on a construction site, there will always be some kind of noise as part of your work environment.

On the construction site, fire sprinkler installers are exposed to loud noises not only from the tools and equipment they use, but also from the noise made from everyone else on the project. Thousands of workers every year suffer preventable hearing loss due to high workplace noise levels. Loud noise can also create physical and psychological stress, reduce productivity, interfere with communication and concentration, and contribute to workplace accidents and injuries by making it difficult to hear warning signals.

OSHA’s workplace noise exposure regulations are at 29 CFR 1910.95 (for general industry) and 29 CFR 1926.52 (for construction).

You are required to wear hearing protection devices in high noise areas.

According to OSHA's regulations in 29 CFR 1910.95 and 29 CFR 1926.52, employers must provide hearing protection devices to each employee exposed to dangerous noise levels at no cost to the employees. Hearing protection devices must be replaced as necessary. Employers must ensure that hearing protection devices are worn by each employee exposed to dangerous noise levels.

What are dangerous levels of noise?

OSHA standards state that 85 decibels or greater (over an 8 hour period of time) is the action level for workers covered by § 1910.95 (general industry). 90 decibels or greater (over an 8 hour period of time) is the action level for workers covered by § 1926.52 (construction). If you were exposed to this level of noise for 8 hours or more per day, over long periods of time, you would experience irreversible hearing loss.

When there are dangerous levels of noise present, employers must use administrative or engineering controls to reduce the hazard when it is feasible to do so. It is also the employer’s responsibility to provide the necessary hearing protection devices. In addition, in all cases where there are dangerous levels of noise present, the employer must implement a hearing conservation program.

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What kinds of hearing protection devices are there?

There are three basic types.

EARPLUGS…These are soft foam shapes that are moldable to your ear. They can cut noise levels up to 30 decibels. And they are comfortable and disposable.

CANAL CAPS…Are soft pads on a head band. They seal the entrance to the ear, BUT they don’t always seal well enough to protect you.

EARMUFFS…These usually look like large headphones, completely covering the ear. They help protect you against moderate to high noise levels. They reduce noise levels by 15 to 25 decibels.

SOME COMMON COMPLAINTS AND THE REAL TRUTH

My hearing protection devices are uncomfortable.
They may be the wrong size or improperly fitted. Check with your supervisor. Your employer is required to ensure a proper fit to each employee.

I’ve been doing this job for years. I’ve gotten used to the noise. It can’t hurt my ears any further.
High noise levels will continue to damage hearing even though you no longer perceive the noise to be loud.

Will I be able to hear people talking to me on the job?
Yes. In fact, hearing protection devices will help you hear normal sounds because they reduce the effects of very loud noise.
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When I wear hearing protection devices, will I be able to hear changes in the sounds of machinery that might signal trouble?
Yes. You’ll get used to the way your equipment normally sounds when you’re wearing your hearing protection device, so you’ll easily notice any difference.

The noise in my workplace isn’t that loud; it doesn’t hurt my ears. What if I don’t like to wear my hearing protection devices?

The NOISE may not “hurt,” but repeated exposure over long periods of time will continue to reduce your ability to hear. You may not notice a loss of hearing until a substantial loss has occurred. Hearing loss is typically gradual, but it is irreversible.

As hearing loss progresses, you will start using a higher volume on your TV and radio and asking people to speak up louder because you can’t hear them. (Some hearing loss may occur with age, but this should only occur later in one’s working lifetime – or in retirement.)

BUT, if your employer uses administrative or engineering controls and/or you use effective hearing protection and your employer implements a hearing conservation program, your ears won’t be exposed to dangerous noise levels. As a result, you will not suffer from preventable hearing loss or stress, and you will continue to enjoy your hearing.

Exposure to high noise levels can cause irreversible damage to hearing