



**NEWS**

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## **Illinois Department of Labor Highlights Importance of Preventing Hearing Damage at Work**

*October is National Protect Your Hearing Month.*

**SPRINGFIELD** – Just about everyone has complained about their workplace being too noisy at one time or another. But noise at work can be a lot more dangerous than a co-worker’s overly loud conversation.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 22 million workers are exposed to potentially damaging noise at work each year. Fortunately, much can be done to mitigate damage to people’s hearing, which is the message the Illinois Department of Labor is stressing during October -- National Protect Your Hearing Month.

Exposure to loud noise can kill the nerving endings in the inner ear, causing permanent hearing damage. Unfortunately, while devices such as hearing aids can assist, nothing can reverse hearing damage once it occurs. Noise-induced hearing damage affects a person’s ability to hear high frequency sounds and understand speech.

But how loud is too loud? According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), if you need to raise your voice to speak to someone three feet away, noise levels may be exceeding 85 decibels. Long or repeated exposure to sounds at or above 85 decibels can cause hearing loss.

Some situations pose obvious dangers for hearing damage. Working around jet engines, operating a jack hammer or using a chainsaw for long periods all qualify as extreme noise environments. But plenty of other less obvious workplaces can pose a risk as well.

“We had never been concerned about noise levels at our jobsites because we always felt the levels would be below the permissible exposure level,” said Stephennie Brumley, Health and Safety Officer for Andrews Engineering in Springfield.

However, about a year ago, Andrew Engineering began working with Illinois OSHA – a division of IDOL – in pursuit of the top national workplace safety ranking, which it achieved earlier this

month. Illinois OSHA's On-Site Consultation Program staff explained that as part of the process, testing would need to be done to ensure that jobsite noise levels were below allowable levels.

After completing noise testing, Andrews Engineering found peak levels were high enough to warrant a hearing conservation program for its field staff, something Brumley says the company has now instituted.

While specially calibrated instruments are used to do OSHA testing for noise levels, a slightly less sophisticated device is easily available for anyone curious about the noise levels around them. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health offers a free download of a sound level meter for any IOS-operating device.

The louder the noise, the less time you need to be exposed to it to suffer hearing damage. A worker who is consistently exposed to 85 decibels for an eight-hour shift, should be provided some form of hearing protection or mitigation.

Noise mitigation can take several forms and can often be accomplished without great expense or engineering. Some simple steps include keeping machinery properly lubricated, choosing low-noise tools and machinery, placing barriers between the noise source and workers. Employers can also reduce the amount of time a worker spends in a noisy area and provide quiet areas for relief from hazardous noise levels.

If it is not possible to reduce noise to safe levels, hearing protection devices such as earplugs and earmuffs should be used to protect workers.

For more information on Illinois OSHA, please visit <https://www2.illinois.gov/idol/Laws-Rules/safety/Pages/default.aspx>