

# Protect Your Hearing

If you're one of the 20 million people exposed to hazardous noise on the job, you'll want to protect yourself from hearing damage. Loud noise over a period of time causes nerve cells in your ears to die, permanently damaging your hearing. This usually happens so gradually that you're not aware of the loss until it's too late. It sometimes takes many years.

You can help protect your hearing by having your hearing tested; giving your ears a rest by getting away from noise whenever you can; and wearing earplugs or earmuffs for protection. They come in a variety of styles and levels of protection.

## Types of Earplugs

- ▶ Formable earplugs—come in two varieties, the disposable kind made of waxed cotton or acoustical fibers that can be molded to your ears, and the semidisposable type made of molded foam, which can be used for up to a week.
- ▶ Premolded earplugs—are made of soft silicone rubber or plastic and are reusable.
- ▶ Custom-molded earplugs—are molded to fit the individual by inserting silicone rubber or plastic molding compound into each ear and allowing it to set. The compound may then be used as earplugs or as molds for earplugs.

## Using Earplugs

- ▶ Earplugs screen out harmful noise while allowing you to hear your coworkers.
- ▶ Earplugs can reduce noise levels by up to 30 decibels.
- ▶ Check the Noise Reduction Rating (NRR) on your earplugs' package. The higher the number, the better the protection.
- ▶ Earplugs are lightweight, inexpensive and low-maintenance.
- ▶ Earplugs are the protectors of choice for work in hot, enclosed environments or in situations where you keep hearing protectors on all day.
- ▶ They're easily worn with eyeglasses and hard hats and other head protection.
- ▶ Follow the manufacturer's instructions exactly when inserting earplugs.
- ▶ To work properly, earplugs must completely fill your ear canal.
- ▶ Make sure your hands are clean when inserting earplugs. Dirt and oils could cause an ear infection.
- ▶ Keep reusable earplugs clean by washing them after each use in warm, soapy water to avoid an ear infection.



## Types of Earmuffs

- ▶ Earmuffs consist of cushioned cups made of molded plastic filled with foam, liquid or air that are attached to a band that can be worn over your head, behind your neck or under your chin.
- ▶ Cap-mounted earmuffs can be attached to hard hats.
- ▶ Dielectric earmuffs have no metal parts, for workers exposed to high voltage.
- ▶ Electronic earmuffs reduce hazardous noises while magnifying sounds you need to hear.

## Using Earmuffs

- ▶ Earmuffs reduce noise by about 20 to 30 decibels.
- ▶ The Noise Reduction Rating (NRR) on your earmuffs indicates their effectiveness.
- ▶ Inspect the condition of your earmuffs before each use.
- ▶ Your earmuffs should fit comfortably, without the headband being too tight or too slack.
- ▶ Earmuff cups should adjust up and down and in and out for a good fit.
- ▶ To work correctly, earmuffs must form a seal around your ears, completely enclosing them, without pinching your earlobes.
- ▶ No hair or clothing should stick out from under the cups.
- ▶ Earmuffs are easy to put on and take off.
- ▶ Earmuffs are bulky and may not fit well with other protective equipment.
- ▶ You can use earplugs with earmuffs for added protection.
- ▶ If you wear safety or other eyeglasses, they may need to be modified to fit with earmuffs.
- ▶ Follow the manufacturer's instructions for proper cleaning and storage.
- ▶ Be sure to replace hardened, cracked or worn earmuff cushions.

