

Tool Box Talk

SAVE YOUR HEARING

JANUARY 2012

Imagine sitting in a room, surrounded by family, yet feeling isolated, ignored, alone.

Your son-in-law is telling a story and everyone seems amused, but you can only pick up the odd word. Frustrated, you want to say, "I can't hear you Bill. Please speak up." But you hold yourself back.

Only minutes ago you made a similar request and while you couldn't hear the collective sigh of family members, you could see the frustration on their faces. Your daughter raised her voice to a near shout and said, "Dad, we keep telling you to get a hearing aid. When are you going to do it.?"

Embarrassed, you retreat into a lonely shell and think, "I'm only 53, not 80. How can I be going deaf so early?"

Damage Adds Up Over Time

The consequences of failing to protect your hearing may take years to show up. Prolonged exposure to noise exceeding 85 decibels (dB), about the same loudness as a vacuum cleaner, can cause permanent hearing loss by damaging the microscopic hair cells inside your ears.

The high frequencies are first to go. You might not be able to hear cymbals or violins clearly on a stereo and find yourself boosting the treble to try to restore the sparkle.

If that were the only result of hearing loss, most people could cope well, but it gets worse. Words begin to sound muffled. Did your wife's telephone message tell you to pick up a loaf of bread or to pick up Uncle Fred?

In a group setting someone who has noise-induced hearing loss can find it impossible to follow one person's voice over the background buzz of a room full of voices.

Take Care of Your Hearing

While most people experience some age-related hearing loss, many have adequate hearing as long as they live. But if you work in a noisy setting and are not regularly using hearing protection, you're setting yourself up for premature hearing loss. Hearing aids are not a cure-all for this condition. Many people using them complain that they still can't understand all of what's said to them, especially in a crowded setting.

Your Hearing Protection Options

If you work in a situation where hearing protection is required, you have a few options to choose from, these are:

Ear Plugs. These work by sealing the ear canal from the source of noise.

There are a few disadvantages to ear plugs:

- Some people don't like to use ear plugs because they have an aversion to inserting something in their ears or, if they weren't properly taught how to insert an ear plug, the previous experience may have been uncomfortable, increasing a resistance to wearing them.
- Ear plugs can make it difficult to hear other noises such as warning alarms or communications from co-workers.
- Foam type ear plugs are designed to be worn only once and should be thrown away once they've been removed.

Some ear plugs are made of a more sturdy plastic and are designed to be re-used. You can tell the difference because reusable ear plugs have a stem that you grasp when inserting so that you don't contaminate the part that goes into the ear.

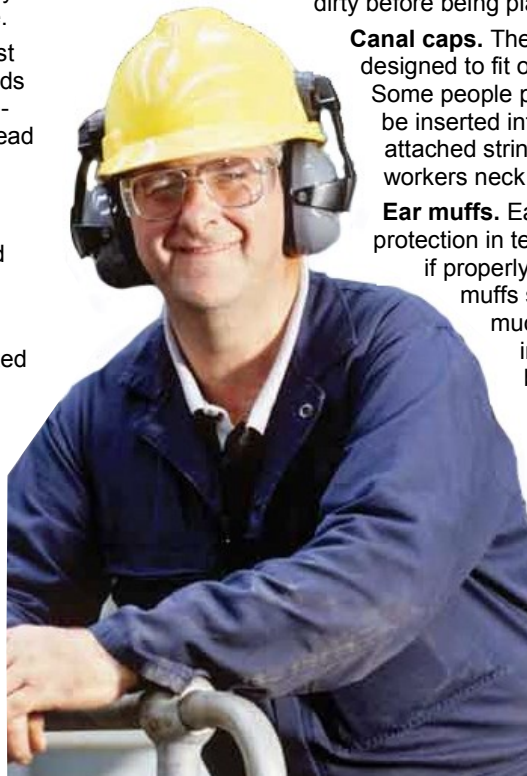
Reusable ear plugs also come in styles that have a band or string that attaches the 2 plugs together and allows you to remove them and wear them around your neck when not in use. The string-types can also be attached to a hardhat. This application is only for cleaner work environments where the ear plugs that are out of your ears won't get dirty before being placed back in.

Canal caps. These are a variation of ear plugs that are designed to fit over the ear canal, not inside it like an ear plug. Some people prefer canal caps because they don't need to be inserted into the ear canal. Most canal caps have an attached string or band so that they can be hung around a workers neck when not in use.

Ear muffs. Ear muffs are a much more expensive type of protection in terms of the initial cost, but they last a long time if properly cared for and are easier to fit and wear. Ear muffs seal the entire ear with a cushioned cup that is much more comfortable. Ear muffs are good for intermittent use, but some people find them to be hot to wear for long periods of time. Ear muffs also come in styles that have built in radio communication capacities. You can also purchase ear muffs that mount safely onto a hard hat.

Final Word

Remember that noise is noise. Prolonged exposure to sound levels exceeding 85 dB can cause permanent damage. Your ears don't care whether the noise is being generated by a chainsaw or a chamber orchestra. Without hearing protection, your quality of life can suffer terribly over time.



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