



Health & Safety & Hearing Loss



Health and safety adjustments made to support employees with hearing loss can also benefit all staff members and create a safer workplace.



KNOW YOUR
OBLIGATIONS



HELPFUL TOOLS, APPS
AND PROCESSES



MITIGATE WORKPLACE
INCIDENTS



NATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR
Deaf & Hard of Hearing

HEALTH AND SAFETY AND HEARING LOSS

Health and Safety is a priority for every good employer, and it is important that you take steps to ensure that all employees are safe at work. Employers have a primary duty of care to protect, so far as is reasonably and practicable, the health and safety of employees. This module, will step you through how to manage risks and evaluate your current health and safety policies to make sure they are fit for purpose to accommodate employees with hearing loss.

HOW TO USE THIS MODULE

Use this module to consider how well your current health and safety practices accommodate employees with hearing loss.

This module covers:

- Your obligations under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015
- How to talk to your staff about any potential health and safety risks
- The potential of work-related stress when employees with hearing loss are not adequately supported
- Health and safety adjustments and assistive technologies to accommodate employees with hearing loss
- Considerations for fires or emergency evacuation
 - Hearing loss aware health and safety training
 - Preventing noise-induced hearing loss in general workplaces.



WHAT AM I REQUIRED TO DO?

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, everyone who goes to work should come home healthy and safe.

Workplaces are legally required to take all practicable steps to ensure the health and safety of their employees and have a role to play in the prevention of harm to all people in the workplace.

Managing health and safety is ideally an ongoing two way conversation between employers and employees that requires:

- Planning, to identify and assess risks
- Undertaking steps to eliminate or minimise risks.
- Checking and monitoring the control measures and
- Actively reviewing and making improvements to your organisation's processes

With over 300,000 New Zealanders working with a hearing loss, it is highly likely that one or more of your current employees have a hearing loss, an employee may develop hearing loss while working for you or you may recruit someone with hearing loss. This module will step you through some key considerations for reasonable adjustments that promote the health and safety of employees with hearing loss.

PRIMARY DUTY OF CARE

The Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 does not discriminate against those with disabilities, nor the people who employ them. As an employer you must ensure so far as is reasonably practicable people's health and safety at work, this is referred to as an employers 'primary duty of care.'

The primary duty of care is a broad, overarching duty. It includes having effective practices in place for:

- Providing and maintaining a work environment that is without risk to health and safety
- The provision of information, training, instruction or supervision that is necessary to protect people from risks to health and safety arising from the work carried out
- The health of workers and the conditions at the workplace are monitored to prevent illness or injury to workers arising from the work carried out, (this includes conditions that cause work-related-stress).

It is important that your organisations staff induction process and health and safety training are accessible to employees with hearing loss. Your health and safety policies must also ensure all employees are aware of and know how to manage the risks of noise-induced hearing loss.

BUSTING MYTHS ABOUT DISABLED EMPLOYEES

Some employers are concerned that hiring disabled employees will be a health risk to themselves and others in the workplace, but disabled people are often more aware of their surrounds and choose roles where they are confident they will be able to manage their disability and contribute to the business.

Evidence shows that disabled employees have fewer health and safety issues, because in managing their impairment they have developed strategies to address health and safety risks. In fact, a study run in 2002 by Deakin University, Melbourne, found that disabled employees averaged one-sixth the recorded occupational health and safety incidents of non-disabled employees.

Most disabled people don't need anything different to perform their jobs, and for those who do, the cost is usually minimal. Only 10% of disabled workers under the age of 65 reported that they had modifications or specialist equipment in their workplace. The most common reasonable accommodation is flexible working arrangements.

Technology has also removed many barriers faced by disabled people, enabling more people to reach their full potential.

STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Workplaces have a legal responsibility under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 to manage risks related to work-related stress, just like they do any other health and safety risk.

For employees with hearing loss, not being adequately supported or accommodated or having an unidentified hearing loss, can also have negative health impacts, including reduced productivity, stress and fatigue. As well as safety risks, with regards to being unaware of danger because they can't hear what is going on around them.

The effects of work-related stress can vary from individual to individual. In general work-related stress is associated with:

- Illness and disease
- Low morale and engagement
- Anxiety
- Low productivity
- Antisocial behaviour

Job stress is the harmful physical and emotional response resulting from a situation where the demands of a job are not matched by resources provided to get the job done. Job stress is now recognised as a significant occupational hazard.

Managing work-related stress requires an integrated approach where both the work conditions creating stress and the impacts of stress on individuals with hearing loss are addressed.

What you can do?

First, you should always try to eliminate the risk. Where this is not possible, you need to consider how to minimise the risk. Here are some example control measures to consider:

- Set achievable demands for your workers in relation to agreed hours of work
- Match worker's skills and abilities to job demands
- Support workers to have a level of control over their pace of work
- Develop multi-disciplinary teams to share ideas and perspectives on ways to address situations.
- Involve workers in decisions that may impact their health and safety, and have processes to enable workers to raise issues and concerns they might have.
- Ensure managers and supervisors have the capability and knowledge to identify, understand and support workers who may be feeling stressed. **You can access more information about this in our module on [Mental Health and Wellbeing](#).**

HEALTH AND SAFETY ADJUSTMENTS

The following outlines some examples of health and safety adjustments that you may want to consider to create a safe workplace for all employees, while accommodating employees who have hearing loss.

SOUND ALERT APPS FOR SMART PHONES:

It's hard to understand how important sound is to our everyday lives until hearing becomes difficult. Sounds like a ringing phone, beeping of the microwave, smoke alarms, and honking cars let us know what's going on around us and alert us to danger.

Sound Alert apps can be used as a second set of ears and can alert people with hearing loss to these sounds by making their phone flash or vibrate when it hears noises that are specified.

VISUAL ALERTS IN THE WORKPLACE:

Visual Alerts, such as flashing lights, can be used to notify a person who is deaf or hard of hearing to sounds or risks in the environment. These can include flashing lights outside a parking building to warn pedestrians of an incoming car, or lights that signal when heavy machinery is in use in the workplace.

WORKING LATE OR WORKING ALONE:

Your lone-working policy should ensure that any person with hearing loss can easily make contact with appropriate colleagues. For example, by SMS text message.

Where a person with hearing loss regularly works alone in an office, you should consider providing a flashing doorbell or vibrating phone to alert the person if someone wants to enter the office.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION TRAINING:

Consider non verbal communication training in your workplace, particularly in any high risk zones where heavy machinery is used. It is important that all employees, those with hearing loss or those wearing hearing protection, can communicate clearly while working together in high risk environments.

LIFTS:

Thought is rarely given to how a person who is deaf or has a significant hearing loss can communicate in the event of a lift breaking down. Typically, the only way for a trapped person to communicate is by the intercom. As a safety measure, ensure all staff with hearing loss are aware of this risk, and encourage them to always have their mobile phone with them when in the lift. Consider installing alternative methods, such as SMS or a wall-mounted text phone.

FIRES OR EMERGENCY EVACUATION

People with hearing loss cannot hear alarms and voice announcements that warn of danger and the need to evacuate. Many codes require new buildings to have flashing strobe lights (visual devices) as part of the standard building alarm system, but because the requirements are not retroactive many buildings don't have them. In addition, strobes are required only on fire alarm systems and simply warn that there may be a fire.

Additional information that is provided over voice systems for a specific type of emergency such as a threatening weather event, or that directs people to use the specific exit, are unavailable to people with hearing loss.

It is extremely important for people with hearing loss to know what, if any, visual notification systems are in place. They also need to be aware of which emergencies will activate the visual notification system and which emergencies will not. Alternative methods of notification need to be put into the emergency evacuation plans for people with hearing loss, so they can get all the information they need to evacuate in a safe and timely manner.

DEVICES OR METHODS FOR NOTIFICATION OF OTHER EMERGENCIES

The following is a partial list of emergencies that should be considered in the development of an alternative warning system:

Natural events: Storms, cyclones, floods, snow, lightening, earthquakes etc.

Human-caused events: Robbery, hostile acts, random violence etc.

If a person with a hearing loss is likely to be in one location for a significant period of time, such as at a desk in an office, installation of a reader board in the work area might be considered to provide appropriate warning in an emergency.

Make sure all private and quiet areas, such as toilets and prayer rooms, have flashing alarms to alert people. Provide your fire wardens with emergency signage they can hang during emergencies that signal there is a fire or emergency evacuation. These signs can be hung in lift areas and at prayer room or toilet entries.

Personal notification devices are also coming on the market. Such devices can be activated in a number of ways, including having a building's alarm system relay information to the device. Information can be displayed in a variety of forms and outputs.

E-mail and TTY phone communications are other alternative methods of notification for people with hearing loss.

Another option is the use of television in public and working areas with the closed caption feature turned on.

EMERGENCY EVACUATION PLAN

It's vital that this is available to employees and in an accessible format at all times. Display in staff-rooms or by the lifts.

HEALTH AND SAFETY TRAINING

Ensuring that all employees have access to your organisation's health and safety training and processes is of utmost importance. Here are a few easy steps you can take as an employer to ensure your organisation's health and safety training is accessible to employees with hearing loss.

Small changes to the training process can make a big difference. Consider doing the following:

- Sending out health and safety materials in advance of training
- Providing assistive technologies, such as speech to text apps, an interpreter (if required), and recording devices, (see the [Support Services and Technologies](#) module for more information)
- Break training into smaller increments
- Allow additional time for training
- Let employees know that one-on-one tutoring is also available
- Arrange the seating in a horse shoe shape - so that everyone can see each other and it is possible to lipread
- If you're using training videos, make sure they have subtitles.
- For more tips on how to make a meeting or training session hearing aware, check out our poster titled: *'Is this Meeting Hearing Aware'* - available on our online Hearing Hub Shop.

PREVENTING NOISE-INDUCED HEARING LOSS

If employees are routinely exposed to noise in the workplace, as an employer you will be required to provide them with hearing checks – these requirements are for workers with an average exposure to noise over 80db.

These checks are an opportunity to monitor an individual's hearing, as well as making assessments about how well your organisation is managing their exposure to loud noise.

What are the hazards and the risks?

When people are exposed to too much noise, there are risks to their health and safety.

- Too much noise can cause permanent hearing loss and tinnitus.
- Too much noise can make people unsafe because they can't hear what is going on around them.

What else do you need to do?

- Make sure that your workers are not exposed to noise levels equivalent to 85dB over 8 hours, or peak noise levels of 140 dB.
- Use signs to identify areas where the noise risk exists and where hearing protection must be worn.
- Warn your workers when noisy work will be happening, so they can move away or wear hearing protection.

Train your workers

- You must make sure that employees receive the information, training, instruction or supervision they need to protect themselves from hazardous noise.

REMIND EMPLOYEES TO KEEP THEIR HEADPHONE VOLUME DOWN & MINIMISE USE!

In open plan offices, many employees wear headphones while they work. Prolonged noise in your ears can be responsible for tinnitus and hearing loss. If employees are listening at volumes that are frequently above 80 dB, then they are at high risk of noise-induced hearing loss. The World Health Organisation recommends limiting headphone use to 90 minutes per day and keeping the volume below 80 dB.

COMING SOON

A new module series on Workplace Noise Safety, which covers how to manage noise and reduce risks of noise-induced hearing loss in the workplace.

This new series includes:

- An Overview, that covers the key facts about noise-induced hearing loss
- A Noisy Workplace Assessment, to identify what you are doing well and highlight any gaps
- Real life Case Studies for inspiration
- An Action Plan, to help you to manage and mitigate noise related risks.

GATHERING INFORMATION

Your general workplace assessment may have already highlighted some of the health and safety gaps that may need to be addressed in your organisation.

There are a diverse range of hearing loss experiences so it is important to talk directly to your employees about their workplace assessment to understand what gaps they have identified, what their specific health and safety risks are and what adjustments they might benefit from in the work environment.

Going forward, we also recommend making one-on-one talks about health and safety part of your induction process, so that you are aware of any adjustments new employees require.

You may want to ask the following:

- Do they have any concerns about their health and safety in the workplace?
- Are there any specific job tasks that are a health and safety risk as a result of their hearing loss?
- Are there accommodations or adjustments your organisation could make to reduce or eliminate these risks?

Once risk management and accommodations are in place, it would be useful to meet with your employee periodically to evaluate the effectiveness of the accommodations and to determine whether additional adjustments are needed.

Based on the information your employee provides you. You and your management team might want to explore the following:

- Do any of the organisation's health and safety processes need to be updated?
- Would your supervisory personnel and employees benefit from further training

SOURCES: *Action on Hearing Loss UK
* Worksafe
* Ministry for Social Development
* National Fire Protection Association





Helping you and your team to become more
inclusive of hearing loss in the workplace.



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