



If you need to raise your voice to be heard by someone within arm's length, you need hearing protection.

One-quarter of B.C.'s young construction workers are putting their hearing at risk

By Jesse Marchand

New data from WorkSafeBC shows that B.C.'s young construction workers are less likely to wear hearing protection than other age groups in the same industry, or even when compared to young workers in other industries. Training is key to preventing permanent hearing loss.

Construction sites are filled with high-risk activities like working at heights, using power tools, and working around moving equipment. When compared to those high-risk activities, loud noise may not be seen as much of a hazard. But, noise can be as devastating to a worker's health as many of the other hazards typically associated with construction work.

And the danger is ever present. Consider that anything above 85 decibels is hazardous, and jackhammers and chainsaws, for example, run at 110 decibels; hammer drills at 115 decibels. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, a 25-year-old carpenter exposed to extreme noise is likely to have hearing equivalent to a 50-year-old.

Despite the risk, almost one-quarter of B.C. construction workers 21-and-under report not wearing hearing protection. Young people are, in fact, far less likely to protect their ears than their older counterparts (24 percent for 21-and-unders, as opposed to 13 percent of over-50s). And young workers in construction are less likely to wear protection than young workers in other industries like manufacturing and primary resources. The data was collected in 2016 from more than 160,000 hearing tests conducted across B.C., as part of hearing loss prevention programs.

It's costing employers a lot too. Since 2006, there have been more than 37,000 accepted claims for noise-induced hearing loss in B.C.

"Noise-induced hearing loss needs to be taken very seriously," says Sasha Brown, WorkSafeBC occupational audiologist. "It can be caused by a single exposure to an extremely loud noise like an explosion, or more typically by repeated exposures to consistent noise. While the damage may be painless, it is irreversible and may go unnoticed for years or even decades until it reaches a point where it has a significant effect on one's quality of life."

Preventing hearing loss

So what's holding the 21-and-unders back?

Providing workers with information, instruction, training, and supervision is key, says Veer Singh, WorkSafeBC supervisor, Prevention Field Services. "Information and instruction relating to noise, as well as training on the use of hearing protection should start at the time of the employee orientation," he says.

Employers are required to provide hearing loss prevention programs, monitor noise levels, and — after establishing a baseline within six months of employment — conduct annual tests to identify early signs of hearing loss.

This includes planning for day-to-day changes in noise levels. Unlike in fixed industries, construction sites are always in flux. A quiet spot one day may be excessively noisy the next. And with site layout changing day-to-day, there are no fixed places to consistently post information or provide safety equipment.

Employers should offer a variety of types of hearing protection and post reminders at various locations around the site. And employees should be shown how to properly fit and wear the protective gear. It can then be reinforced for through a toolbox talk, says Singh.

Then, employers need to walk the walk, he adds. "Employers should lead by example — ensuring they,

as well as their tenured employees, are also using hearing protection when required," stresses Singh.

WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer Ashley Teister agrees, adding that hearing protection is for everyone, not just the person making the noise. "Often the person making the noise wears protection, but those in the immediate vicinity don't. If workers need to raise their voice to be heard by someone within arm's length, they should be protecting their ears."

Creating a hearing loss prevention program

The bottom line is that is that "employers need to understand the prevalence and seriousness of this occupational disease, and do something about it," says Brown. "They need to have hearing loss prevention programs and testing in place, so workers don't have to live with debilitating effects for the rest of their lives."

WorkSafeBC has online resources to assist in understanding and preventing noise-induced hearing loss at worksafebc.com. Those resources include:

- The "Hearing loss prevention" landing page
- [Sound advice: A guide to hearing loss prevention programs](#)
- [Hear for Good: Preventing Noise Exposure at Work](#)
- [Testing your hearing: How and Why](#) 🧐



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