

WHY TEST HEARING?

One quarter of all workers in British Columbia are exposed to noise loud enough to damage their hearing. Noise is the most common health hazard in industry.

If you are slowly losing your hearing because of industrial noise, you may not know it. Hearing declines gradually, so by the time you notice the loss, it's too late. You can prevent this by protecting your hearing from loud noise.

A hearing test warns you of possible hearing loss from industrial noise. The test may also reveal hearing problems due to other causes. Some of these other types of hearing problems can be treated, and hearing ability improved.

The first sign that noise may be affecting your hearing is the loss of ability to hear high-pitched sounds. This sample audiogram (a graph of hearing test results) shows such a loss.

In this case, the worker is losing hearing for high-pitched sounds, shown by the dip at 4000 Hz. If the ears aren't protected from loud noise and this loss gets worse, ability to understand speech is affected.

WorkSafeBC (Workers' Compensation Board of B.C.) has a program to stop occupational hearing loss in British Columbia. As part of this, the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation requires annual hearing tests for workers exposed to hazardous noise.

WHO DOES THE TESTING?

Your employer pays for the testing. Your employer may have an in-house testing facility, or may hire a contractor to do the test. (WorkSafeBC does not do the testing.) The hearing test contractor may bring a mobile testing facility. In any case, the sound-treated test booth and audiometer used to test your hearing must meet WorkSafeBC standards. In addition, WorkSafeBC authorizes the audiometric technicians who do the testing.

After your test, the technician will explain the results to you. If you have a significant hearing loss, the technician will provide you with a copy of your test and recommend that you see your doctor. The technician isn't qualified to determine what caused your hearing loss. It's up to your doctor or ear specialist to provide treatment if you have a correctable hearing problem or to recommend you file a hearing-loss claim if you

have a noise-related hearing problem. If your physician says that you have a noise-induced hearing loss, you must file a compensation claim within one year.

HOW IS THE TESTING DONE?

Tones of different pitches are presented through earphones to each ear separately. You are asked to respond to the sound you hear, even if it's very faint. The technician records the level of the softest sounds you hear on an audiogram. You can be tested during work hours if you wear hearing protection prior to the test.

WHY IS A MEDICAL HISTORY TAKEN?

A medical history is taken during your first hearing test to identify medical reasons why you may be at high risk for hearing loss. Some medical conditions affecting the blood circulation, such as diabetes, heart disease, heart attack, high blood pressure, and stroke, are thought to make the sensory hearing cells more susceptible to noise damage. Cigarette smoking also affects your circulation.

The medical history information is kept by WorkSafeBC, not your employer. Your personal information is kept confidential by WorkSafeBC and used only for statistical and research purposes.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE TEST RESULTS?

All hearing test results are stored at WorkSafeBC. During the test, you're asked for your social insurance number by the audiometric technician. This number and your birth date identify your file. Keeping records in a central registry ensures your hearing history isn't lost if you change jobs. If you don't want to provide your social insurance number, a hearing test may still be done, but the information can't be stored by WorkSafeBC.

Reports are sent to employers to help them measure the effectiveness of their hearing conservation programs. Employers keep copies of the hearing test results so the audiometric technicians can compare your results from year to year and advise you of any changes. Hearing test results must be kept confidential by your employer. You are entitled to have a copy of your hearing test.

WORKSAFEBC AND HEARING CONSERVATION

The Hearing Conservation Section of WorkSafeBC authorizes industrial audiometric technicians to test hearing and advise on the proper use and care of hearing protection.

For more information, contact:
WorkSafeBC Hearing Conservation Section
PO Box 5350 Stn Terminal
Vancouver BC V6B 5L5
Phone 604 276-3136 / Toll-free 1 888 621-7233, ext. 3136

For additional materials on hearing conservation, go to **WorkSafeBC.com**. Visit the Safety at Work centre and choose Hearing Loss Prevention under Topics.

