



With noise levels up to 32 times higher than safe limits, Vancouver and Victoria bars could pose a risk for workers.

# Harmful noise exposure not ‘part of the job’

By Holly Munn

**Loud music in a bar or nightclub may seem like a normal part of the industry, but no one should lose their hearing because of their job.**

Music and chatter in restaurants can improve ambiance and encourage table turnover, but too much noise can have long-lasting and damaging results. Noise measurements gathered over the years, including some recently by WorkSafeBC, show that many Vancouver and Victoria bars have noise levels up to 32 times higher than the safe limit of 85 decibels (dB) — approximately the volume of a heavy traffic intersection or power lawn mower. This means that permanent hearing loss can happen in as few as 15 minutes.

In addition to louder music, over the past 20 years, the design of restaurants has changed dramatically: plush chairs, carpeting, and canvas pictures on the wall that previously reduced the amount of ambient noise have been taken out in favour of bare industrial spaces with shiny concrete or tile floors, high ceilings, and bare walls. This has increased the sound level in many restaurants.

Regardless of how a restaurant is designed for customers, employers need to make sure the noise isn't causing long-term hearing damage to their staff. A good first step is to reduce the amount of noise that workers are exposed to. This may be as simple as turning down the music or adding noise absorption.

“Most workers assume that a noisy atmosphere is just part of the job of working in a bar or restaurant,” says Lorne Scarlett, a WorkSafeBC industry specialist. “But employers can prevent permanent hearing loss by introducing hearing-loss prevention programs.”

## **Once you notice the damage, it's too late**

If your job requires you to be in a noisy environment for hours every week, you may find your hearing isn't as sharp as it used to be.

“Damage happens before a person even realizes there is a problem,” says Sasha Brown, a WorkSafeBC occupational audiologist. Hearing loss occurs when the tiny sensory cells, called hair cells, no longer effectively transmit the sound to your auditory system.

“Even people with more substantial hearing loss may not notice what they are missing.”

## Hearing protection can improve conversation

Many restaurant and hospitality workers don't want to wear hearing protection because they think it will be ugly and are worried they won't be able to hear patrons. But, as Brown explains, “Most people find they can hear people better when they are wearing hearing protection. The reason is that the ears aren't overloaded with sound and can process conversation and music normally. We did a small survey with a number of servers and bartenders in Vancouver and they were surprised at how well they could hear their customers,” says Scarlett.

They also learned that modern hearing protection can look good and feel comfortable. “They loved the look of the high-fidelity hearing protection we provided. Finally, some were concerned about comfort, but when they tried hearing protection for a weekend, most felt hearing protection was surprisingly comfortable.”

## Test noise levels at your business

By law, all employers whose workers are regularly exposed to noise over 85 dB must have a hearing conservation program that includes hearing protection and annual hearing tests. As a first step, employers can download the free NIOSH Sound Level Meter app in IOS and test it out at your busier times. The NIOSH app is produced by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Though the NIOSH app can be quite accurate if used with a calibrated external microphone, when using smartphone apps in general “it's best to assume that the measurement has a large margin of error, as much as  $\pm 10$  dB. This means that if a smartphone app measures 75 dBA (a decibel rating system that takes the human ear into account), you should conduct measurements with a calibrated sound-level meter and start a hearing conservation program,” notes Brown.

To encourage industry partners to take notice, WorkSafeBC offered free hearing screenings at a recent BC Hospitality Industry Summit and the demand was overwhelming. A hearing screening only takes about 15 to 20 minutes and is easy and painless. “After you are done, the technician will explain your results

and let you know if you need to see your doctor for further testing,” adds Brown.

The tide of noisy establishments may be turning — customer review apps are beginning to ask guests to rate the noise in an establishment, indicating that some customers are actively seeking out quieter locations. Until you decide to turn down the volume in your establishment, test the noise level and make sure you are protecting your workers' hearing.

## Read the bulletin

The WorkSafeBC bulletin [Protecting workers from noise in the service industry](#) has more detailed information on exposure limits for noise. Find it on [worksafebc.com](#). ☺

## What noise does to your ears



Hearing loss can seriously affect your lifestyle. The video [Protect your hearing: What noise does to your ears](#) highlights what workplace noise does to your ears and what you can do to prevent noise-induced hearing loss. Find it on [worksafebc.com](#).

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