How loud is it?

Preventing hearing loss for workers in fishing and marine

Workers in fishing and other marine industries can be exposed to high levels of noise, often over long shifts or over many years of working. Noise comes from machinery and equipment, like engines and winches, and from vibrations and work processes.

Have you ever felt your ears ring or feel plugged after you've been to a concert? How about after you've spent time in the engine room on your vessel? Your ears might feel like they're back to normal the next day, but your hearing may have already been damaged. If you're operating equipment or spending time near machinery and have to raise your voice to be heard by someone an arm's length (about one metre) away, the noise level is likely hazardous.

Hearing loss not only affects you at work, but can also have an impact on your life at home or in social situations. For example, you might notice family members have to shout to be heard by you, or you might wonder if you're being left out of conversations with friends because you can't hear what's going on.

That's why it's so important for your employer — or you, if you're an owner-operator — to manage the risk of hearing loss on your vessel. This involves assessing noise levels and making changes to work processes to reduce noise levels if they're hazardous. When noise levels and exposure times can't be minimized to eliminate the hazard, you must wear appropriate hearing protection.

How noise affects your hearing

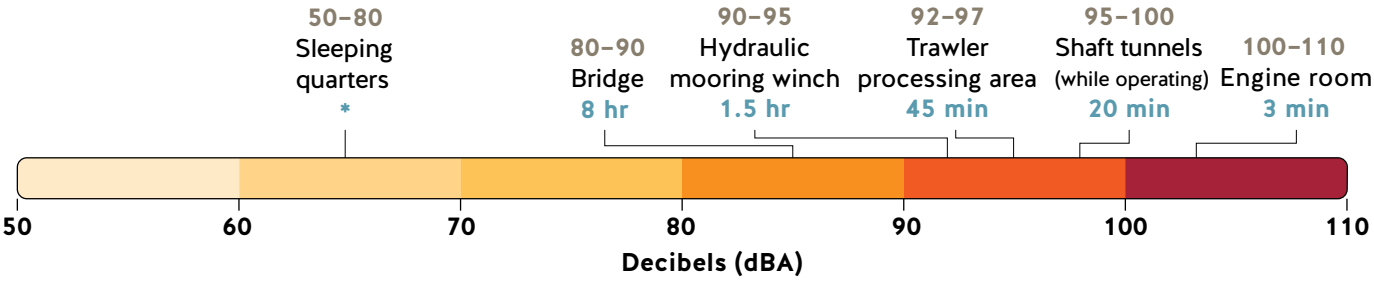
Noise-induced hearing loss usually happens gradually and is painless, permanent, and irreversible. Damage from exposure to noise is cumulative, and the longer you're exposed to noise, the more harmful it is. This means that working long shifts exposed to high levels of noise can be harmful, but so can being exposed to moderate levels of noise throughout your career.

Being exposed for a short time to extremely high levels of noise, like the noise from an explosion, can also damage hearing. The damage can be made worse if you're exposed to noise off the water as well — for example, while riding a motorcycle or visiting a loud pub.

Noise in fishing and marine

Noise levels vary depending on the type of vessel you're on and the activity you're doing. For example, noise levels on the deck can range from 80–102 decibels depending on the size of the vessel, which deck you're working on, and what equipment is running.

The graph below shows **typical decibel levels** for common areas and equipment in fishing and other marine industries. It also shows the maximum amount of time you can spend exposed to these noise levels without hearing protection before you're at risk of permanent hearing loss.



*Your hearing is particularly at risk if noise levels in sleeping quarters are not below 55 dBA, as your ears do not get enough rest time during sleep to recover from noise exposure. Wearing earplugs while sleeping can help reduce the noise levels to below 40 dBA.

Hearing testing

Workers in fishing and other marine industries are severely undertested for hearing loss. Getting an annual hearing test shows how well the hearing conservation efforts on your boat or vessel or in your marine operations are working. If your test shows you have signs of noise-induced hearing loss, it's time to make changes to how your hearing is being protected.

Hearing protection

Employers are responsible for controlling hazardous noise in the workplace. If you're an owner-operator, this is your responsibility. The preferred way to control hazardous noise is by eliminating the source or reducing noise levels. For example, maintaining engines and other machinery can help reduce vibration and noise levels. If it's not possible to reduce noise to a safe level, you'll have to use hearing protection. Keep the following things in mind:

- Hearing protection should be comfortable, be compatible with other types of personal protective equipment (PPE), and still allow for communication.
- Be sure you're protected for the entire time you're exposed to noise. Wear hearing protection before you enter a noisy area and only remove it once you're away from the noise.
- If earplugs are your hearing protection, make sure they fit properly and are inserted correctly. Here's a good rule of thumb: Someone facing you shouldn't be able to see the compressible foam earplugs you're wearing if they're in properly.
- Earbuds and headphones designed for listening to music don't provide hearing protection. Music and podcasts can also distract you from other important sounds, like approaching machinery, alarms, or warnings from other workers.

Visit worksafebc.com/hearing-loss-prevention for more information and resources.