

How loud is it?

Preventing hearing loss for workers in horticulture

Horticultural growers experience one of the highest rates of noise-induced hearing loss among all workers. Damaging noise levels come from equipment, like tractors, conveyors, trimmers, and chainsaws, and from processes like planting, tilling, and extruding.

Have you ever felt your ears ring or feel plugged after you've been to a concert? How about after working with or near cultivation or maintenance equipment at your operation or facility? Your ears might feel like they're back to normal the next day, but your hearing may have already been damaged. If you're working near equipment 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 the owner — to manage the risk of hearing loss at your operation or facility. This involves assessing noise levels in your operations 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. The longer you're exposed to noise, the more harmful it is. So if you've been working in the agriculture industry most of your life, you may have had more exposure to sources of noise that can affect your hearing.

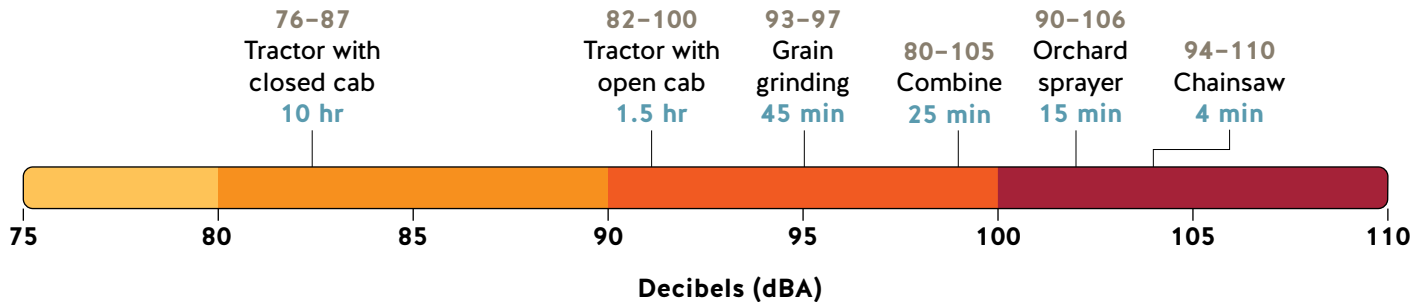
Being exposed for a short time to extremely high levels of noise, like the noise from a propane canon, can also damage hearing. The damage can be made worse if you're exposed to noise off the job as well — for example, while riding a motorcycle or visiting a loud pub.



Exposure to some chemicals, such as pesticides, paint, and diesel exhaust, can cause hearing loss. If you're exposed to these chemicals and noise at the same time, the damage to your hearing can be greater than being exposed to each separately.

Noise in horticulture

Noise levels vary depending on the equipment you're operating or near and the activity you're doing. The graph below shows **typical decibel levels** for common tasks and equipment in horticulture. 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.



Hearing testing

Growers are severely undertested for hearing loss. Getting an annual hearing test shows how well the hearing conservation efforts at your operation or facility 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

Every grower is responsible for controlling hazardous noise at their operation or facility, preferably by eliminating the source or reducing noise levels. For example, maintaining equipment 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, such as approaching machinery, animals, or warnings from other workers..

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