

Don't turn a deaf ear to the hearing loss risks

A recent survey revealed that workplace noise isn't regarded as a major concern by many people who work in high-noise jobs. Yet the incidence of noise-induced hearing loss in New Zealand is fast approaching epidemic proportions, with at least 12 new cases reported every day.

The tragedy of this is that noise-induced hearing loss is almost entirely preventable. But you must start acting today to ward off future deafness, which usually develops slowly and without you being aware that it's happening.

One of the main reasons why noise-induced hearing loss is so common is that your ears aren't good at telling you that you're damaging them.

If you hurt yourself on the job the pain is usually pretty immediate. But your ears can feel totally comfortable even while they're suffering damage. That's why it pays to err on the side of caution and take steps to protect your hearing, even though the environment you're working in may not sound overly noisy. Noise should be approached like any other workplace hazard, by applying the three-step hazard management rule:

- if possible, eliminate as many sources of noise as possible, eg replace noisy equipment with quieter models

- if you can't eliminate a source of noise, then try to isolate the noise it produces, eg by using sound baffling or dampening material
- finally, use hearing protection, such as earplugs or earmuffs, to minimise the impact of any remaining noise that does reach your ears.

Most earmuffs show the level of noise they will protect you against. Ask the retailer about this, to make sure you get the right ones for the particular environment you're working in. Also make sure that any earmuffs you buy:

- meet approved safety standards
- fit well
- are comfortable to wear - this is important, so you're not tempted to take the earmuffs off when you should be wearing them.

As someone who works with a lot of noise, you need to be conscious of what you do outside of work, too. This is because your ears can only handle a certain amount of noise over a 24-hour period. If you've been in a noisy area all day, therefore, it's not a good idea to go home and listen to loud music. Try to get some quiet time after work, to give your ears a break. It's also a good idea to get your hearing checked regularly - at least once a year if possible.

ACC targets log drivers' health and fitness

A health and fitness programme designed for logging truck drivers is already helping a group of drivers lighten their loads after less than two months on the go. 'Fit for the Road' is a pilot programme that is helping 46 drivers and some transport company staff get fit, eat healthily and lose weight. It is supported by the Log Transport Safety Council and ACC. The push to implement a health programme for logging truck drivers came after research by Transport Engineering Research New Zealand (TERNZ) showed that 38% of logging drivers were classified as 'obese' or 'very obese'. That compares to approximately 22% of New Zealand males of a similar age.

"It can be very hard for truck drivers to maintain a healthy lifestyle because of the early starts and long hours sitting in a cab," said Warwick Wilshier, the chairman of the LTSC. "But we knew that drivers were keen to take any help they could get to improve their lifestyle and their health."

Healthier drivers are less likely to have crashes, which is why ACC is behind the programme. "Not only will improving their health make drivers less likely to have a seizure while behind the wheel, being fit makes you less fatigued and also less likely to be injured while doing heavier jobs," ACC's Debra Stearns said.

The programme, which is run remotely, started in October with a series of health checks that monitored the

participants' Body Mass Index (BMI), blood pressure, cholesterol, glucose, and stress.

Michelle Kedian from MAK Health and Safety Ltd, who manages the programme, said they originally wanted 40 for the programme, but took on 46 because of the high level of interest. "While most of the participants are drivers, there are also nine non-driving staff taking part, including some managers who wanted to lead by example. The participants are organised into regional teams to give them support - as well as a healthy dose of competition!"

Mrs Kedian said the initial information showed that only 12 of the 46 participants had a BMI less than 30, which is generally considered to be obese. "But the enthusiasm to improve that has been amazing. They've all reported that they are enjoying the ActiveSmart walking, running or cycling programmes and are eating healthier. In fact, one driver excitedly told me he'd already lost 5kg, which is a great result."

At the start of each month the participants are mailed information about nutrition and fitness, which follow a theme for the month. December's theme is 'Surviving Christmas' and making healthy choices at social functions, while January focuses on 'Getting Back on Track' and making exercise a family occasion.

For more information about Fit for the Road, please go to www.logtruck.co.nz <<http://www.logtruck.co.nz/>>