Breaking the Silenceon Industrial Hearing Loss

Motivation is key in preventing noise-induced hearing loss

'Studies have shown that workers resist wearing hearing protection if the devices are not comfortable or if they interfere with communication and job performance.' 'Unlike other occupational injuries, noise-induced hearing loss causes no pain or visible trauma.'

"The word 'motivation' does not appear in OSHA's regulations on hearing conservation," says industrial audiologist Brad Witt in presentations to safety professionals. "But the safety-savvy employer will know motivation is the keystone to preventing noise-induced hearing loss. Motivated employees take responsibility for protecting their hearing both on and off the job rather than just viewing hearing protectors as a workplace compliance issue." Witt, who is the audiology and regulatory affairs manager for the Bacou-Dalloz Hearing Safety Group, tells his audiences that there are three ways to instill the level of risk awareness that motivates workers to take proper defensive action by wearing their hearing protectors. "First," he says, "is to dispel their illusion of invulnerability." When it comes to ignoring hazardous noise, it's not only the young who feel invulnerable. Even seasoned workers will claim that the loud noise does not bother them because they are accustomed to the noise, explains Witt. But while the brain may grow accustomed to constant noise, "anatomically, the ears can never 'toughen up' against hazardous noise. Ears respond by losing hearing."

Method #1

Dispelling the illusion can be done in several ways. One of the most effective is to show workers exactly how noise affects them. "Several studies have found that the incidence of noise-induced hearing loss drops significantly when workers are provided a copy of their annual audiometric tests with an explanation of the results. It is hard to argue with an objective test that historically shows the progression of hearing loss from year to year."

Method #2

Demonstrating "future risk" is the second method Witt suggests for bringing home the need for hearing protection. "We live in a culture of the 'here and now,'" he says, "but noise-induced hearing loss displays no visible signs of injury and typically develops over years of exposure." Many employers use audio demonstrations to simulate hearing loss so that the worker has a clear understanding of the future risk and the need for adequate protection today. Another effective tool is to have employees talk to older workers who have suffered hearing loss and regret their

disregard for hearing protection.

Method #3

The third motivation tool that Witt recommends is to remove the barriers to wearing hearing protection. "This can be as simple as ensuring an adequate supply of earplugs by installing dispensers," says Witt, "but oftentimes the barriers run deeper." Studies have shown that workers resist wearing hearing protection if the devices are not comfortable or if they interfere with communication and job performance. "It is hard to blame workers for being dissatisfied with their hearing protectors when the only choices offered are earplugs that overprotect and isolate the worker," says Witt. "Hearing protectors are now available that address workers' concerns of overprotection and communication interference. Earplugs offer different attenuation ratings (NRRs) for different noise levels; others are made of special high-tech material that conforms to the shape of the wearer's ear canal. Several earplugs and earmuffs have been designed to maximize communication through uniform attenuation, allowing wearers to hear important sounds more naturally while still protecting them from harmful noise levels. Electronic earmuffs can also enhance communication by amplifying ambient sounds, including speech and warning signals, to a safe level while protecting against louder, more damaging noise." "Unlike other occupational injuries, noise-induced hearing loss causes no pain or visible trauma," says Witt. "It is unnoticeable in its earliest stages and generally takes years to diagnose. By showing these workers their susceptibility to noise damage, demonstrating the future risk and removing the barriers to proper wearing of hearing protection, an employer invests in a workforce that takes responsibility for its own hearing protection, both on and off the job." *More information about hearing protection is available from Bacou-Dalloz Hearing Safety Group by calling 800-430-5490 or visiting www.hearingportal.com. Bacou-Dalloz Hearing Safety Group, 7828 Waterville Rd., San Diego, CA 92154, specializes in the design and manufacture of personal protective equipment such as the earmuffs depicted with this article.*

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