

Noise-Induced Hearing Loss: Implications for Schools

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Are public schools a health hazard for hearing loss?

YES, both employees and students are in working and learning in environments that have sufficient noise exposure to result in hearing loss. Once present, hearing loss is generally irreversible. It begins a process that impacts communication ability, learning, and eventually, quality of life.

Did you know that schools are exempt from federal standards that are designed to protect individuals from noise and other occupational, safety, and health problems?

Congress passes laws requiring employers to protect employees working in hazardous areas but exempts government entities such as our public schools. Schools may comply with some aspects of the legal requirements as a self-protective strategy should litigation evolve with an employee or student but many of the important aspects of the occupational noise standard law such as monitoring the hearing of individuals who are exposed to high noise levels are overlooked.

Awareness of noise issues and knowledge about the impact of exposure to loud noise is limited. Even though many resources are available, individuals in noise impacted settings do not receive sufficient education and training about noise hazards to understand and promote the importance of these programs. Areas such as industrial technology, music, and physical education are common education settings where hazardous noise levels are present. While ear protection is sometimes available in industrial technology classes, it is not found in the other school areas. Further, there is not a requirement to utilize ear protection unless specific equipment has been identified as a noise hazard. While the equipment noise levels may be monitored, they do not take into consideration how the overall noise exposure increases when multiple pieces of equipment are operating simultaneously. In some of these situations, the noise levels can exceed maximum allowable levels resulting in very brief exposure times before hearing damage is likely.

What needs to be done?

1. Education programs must be embedded into existing school health and science curriculums at multiple grade levels and noise safety (just like hunter safety) must be taught as part of the classes that contain potentially hazardous noise exposure.
2. Noise safety should also be required content for the college programs that train teachers in these areas and include strategies to minimize noise exposures in the classroom.
3. Schools should be required to monitor the hearing levels of both classified employees and teachers who work in noise hazard areas.
4. Hearing protection should be required for all individuals who are exposed to potentially hazardous levels of noise.

5. Training should be provided to school employees in the areas of hearing loss prevention, proper use of earplugs/earmuffs, noise control strategies and the results of hearing tests.
6. Schools should consider policies or guidelines that limit the decibel level or exposure time related to school sanctioned events.

Noise-induced hearing loss is an invisible problem that is still under the radar screen of most people. In this time of increasing recreational noise exposure and concern about health issues, our priority should be to bring this health hazard to the attention of the public and to develop education programs in public schools aimed at reversing the hearing loss trend. This is a problem that can be eradicated with education.