

New Control of Noise at Work Regulations

New control of noise regulations come into force on 6th April 2006. Most businesses are not aware the new regulations will:

- Reduce the first action level from 85dB(A) to 80dB(A) and a peak sound pressure of 135dB(A)
- Reduce the second action level from 90dB(A) to 85dB(A) and a peak sound pressure of 137dB(A)
- Introduce a new limit value for personal daily or weekly exposure of 87dB(A) and a peak sound pressure of 140dB(A)

Any noise above 80dB can potentially cause hearing loss and the loss is caused by the power of the sound and the length of time you are exposed. Any exposure to noise above 140dB can cause immediate hearing damage.

To give you some idea of what these exposures mean, the following table may prove useful:

Event	Sound Level	Description	Unprotected	Protected
Gunfire, jet afterburners	140db and above	Irreversible hearing loss	None	None
Loud Rock Concert	120dB	Threshold of Pain	2 minutes	1 hour
Nightclub/Disco	110dB	Extremely Loud	3 minutes	2 hours
Underground Train	100dB	Very Loud	15 minutes	8 hours
Busy Pub	90dB	Very Annoying	2 hours	64 hours
Hairdryer	80dB	Annoying	8 hours	Unlimited
Busy Office	70dB	Difficult to concentrate	Unlimited	Unlimited
Conversational speech	50 - 60db	Can be intrusive at 60db	Unlimited	Unlimited
Light traffic at 30 metres	50	Quiet	Unlimited	Unlimited
Quiet Office	40dB	Very Quiet	Unlimited	Unlimited
Rustling leaves	20 - 30dB	Whisper	Unlimited	Unlimited
Just Audible	10dB	Normal breathing	Unlimited	Unlimited
Near total Silence	0dB		Unlimited	Unlimited

Currently it is estimated that over 2.2million workers are exposed to noise levels above 80dB(A) including over 1 million exposed to levels above 85dB(A) and 450,000 at levels above 90dB(A). Many of these workers are employed in or associated with the construction and house building industries.

In 2004, almost 40% of occupational disease claims were for deafness so the new regulations clearly require employers to take even greater measures to ensure that employees are adequately protected from workplace noise exposures.

It is predicted the updated regulations will spawn a new wave of claims from industries that may, up to now, have felt they were not particularly at risk, such as printers. The HSE has prepared guidance for employers on the Control of Noise at Work Regulations that gives practical guidelines to employers on determining whether a noise problem exists at all. For example:

- Do employees have to raise their voices to carry out a normal conversation at 2 metres apart?
- Do employees use noisy power tools or machinery for more than half an hour per day?
- Is the noise intrusive for most of the day e.g. continuously running compressors?
- Are there noises due to impact e.g. pile-driving, cartridge tools, impact tools?

If elimination of noise is not possible, isolation, partitioning and protection methods must all be considered.

There is a two year transitional period for the music and entertainment industry until April 2008