

protect your hearing

Decibel (dB) levels of familiar sounds

dB Sound

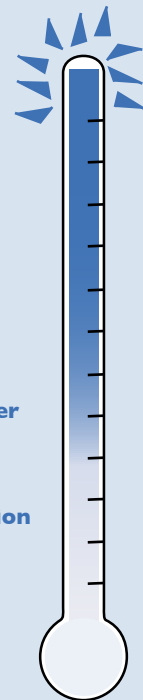
140 Gunshot

110 Chainsaw

90 Lawnmower

60 Normal Conversation

30 Whisper



Like many construction workers, you may not hear as well as you once did, and that may worry you. Your concerns are real—by retirement, many construction workers have a noticeable hearing loss. You and your employer need to take steps to protect your hearing, and this pamphlet will help you do so.

What is noise?

Noise is unwanted sound. It is measured on a decibel scale. Noise levels for some familiar sounds are shown at left.

What if you are exposed to too much noise?

Noise exposures that are loud enough and last long enough can damage nerves in your inner ear. This causes *permanent and irreversible* hearing loss.

Hearing loss makes it hard to:

- talk with family, friends, and coworkers.
- hear warning signals
- enjoy music, nature, voices, and other good sounds.

Once you have a hearing loss, it *cannot* be reversed by using hearing aids. Hearing aids can make sounds louder, but they can't make the sounds clearer.

Safe noise levels

The legal limit for construction workers in Washington is an 8-hour (full-shift) average noise exposure of 85 decibels. This limit is enforced by WISHA. Construction workers in most other states have an 8-hour limit of 90 decibels enforced by OSHA.

If you must raise your voice to talk to someone an arm's length away, the noise level is probably over 85 decibels. Workers with an average noise exposure above 85 decibels need to wear hearing protectors—either earplugs or earmuffs—and be in a hearing loss prevention program. You should wear hearing protectors *any* time noise levels are over 85 decibels.

Noise exposure levels for construction workers

University of Washington researchers have been measuring the noise exposures of construction workers. We found:

- the average level was 81 decibels across a full work shift
- more than one-third of work shifts were above the 8-hour limit of 85 decibels
- more than half of work shifts had short periods of extremely high levels (above 115 decibels)

HIGH HAZARD

Potentially harmful after short-term exposure (95 decibels and above)

CAUTION ZONE

Harmful after long-term exposure (85-95 decibels)

LOW HAZARD

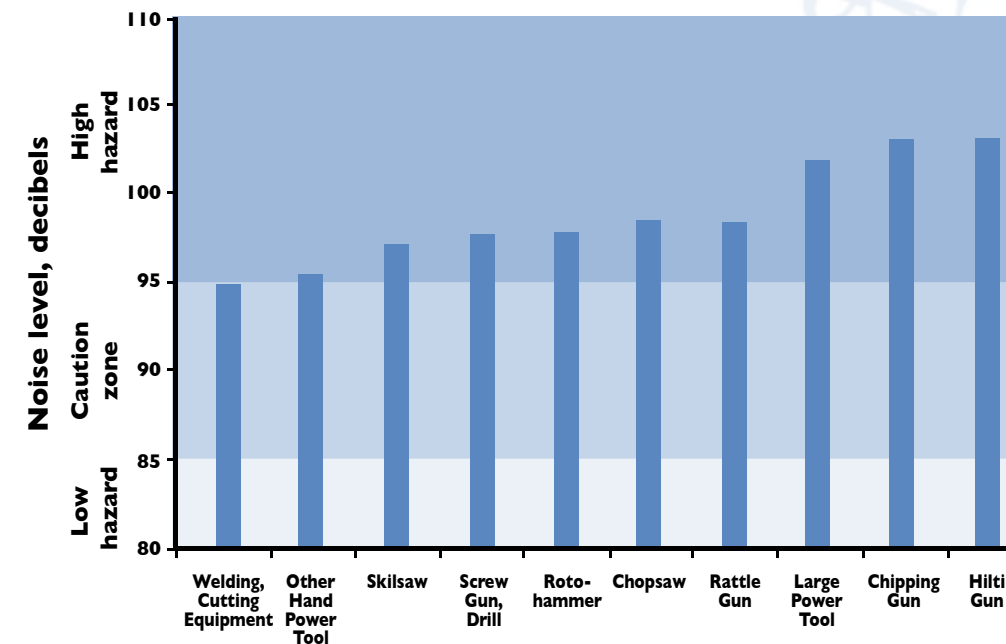
Noise below 85 decibels

Noise levels of tools

We measured the noise levels of various tools used by many construction workers in different trades. For the ten loudest tools, we found that:

- the average noise level was always higher than 85 decibels
- the highest average noise levels came from Hilti guns, chipping guns, and large power tools

Average noise levels of the ten loudest tools

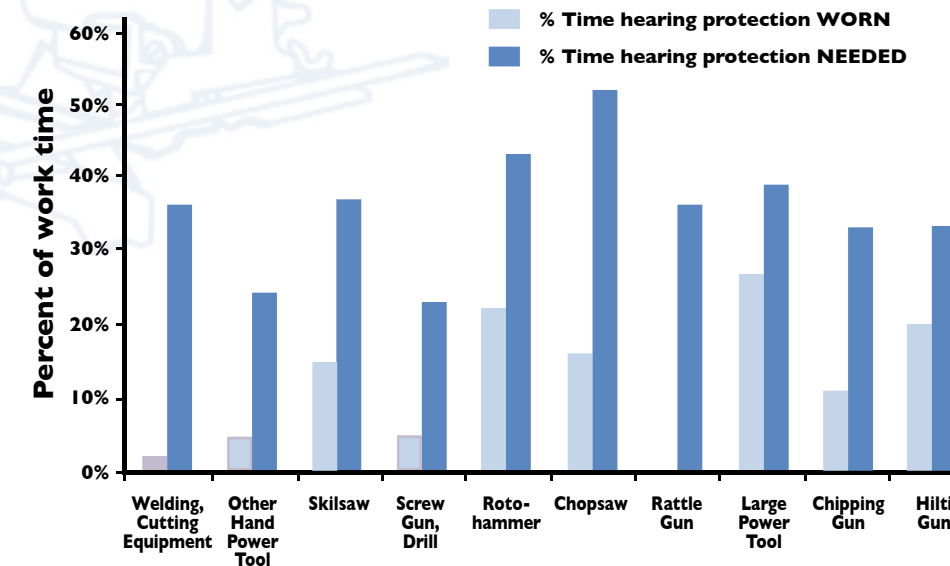


Hearing protection use

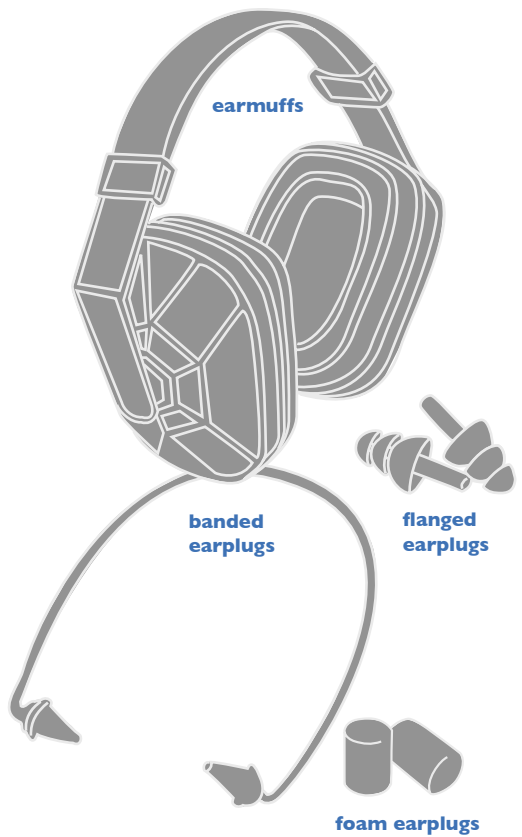
We looked at whether construction workers used hearing protectors when their noise levels were above the limit of 85 decibels. We found that hearing protection was:

- used less than *half* of the time it was needed overall
- needed most with rotohammers and chopsaws
- worn most often with large power tools and rotohammers
- never* worn when needed with rattle guns

Hearing protection use for ten loudest tools



the best protector is the one you'll wear



How you can stop hearing loss

Our research shows construction workers are often exposed to too much noise, and need to be in a hearing loss prevention program. This program should include noise monitoring, training, efforts to reduce noise, and use of hearing protectors.

The basics of hearing protection

- Consider noise sources around you—not just your own tasks—when deciding when to wear hearing protectors.
- If your noise exposure is intermittent, try banded earplugs or earmuffs. They are easy to put on and take off.
- All hearing protectors are labeled with a Noise Reduction Rating (NRR) in decibels. The NRR is usually about *twice* as high as the protection you will actually get.
- Keep your protectors with you so you have them when you need them.

How much hearing protection do I need?

Based on our measurements, most construction workers will get enough protection if they wear a hearing protector with an NRR of 14 decibels. For most activities, an NRR higher than 14 decibels will block *too much* sound and may interfere with communication, including warning signals. Construction workers with very high noise exposures need an NRR between 14 and 33 decibels.

Finding a hearing protector that works for you

Hearing protectors are like shoes: one style will not work for all workers and all exposure levels. You may have to try several styles before you find one that is comfortable and works for you. It may take several weeks before you get used to wearing hearing protectors. Your employer should train you on how to wear hearing protectors properly.



Also keep in mind

Your employer may be able to reduce your exposure by using quieter equipment, blocking noise with shields, or moving noisy equipment away from you. All construction workers should be enrolled in a hearing loss prevention program—find out if your employer has one.

Our Web site

<http://depts.washington.edu/ocnoise>

Or contact us at 206-543-9711 or by e-mail at cnstsafe@u.washington.edu

Similar pamphlets are available for the following trades at the above Web site

Bricklayers, Carpenters, Cement Masons, Electricians, Insulation Workers, Ironworkers, Laborers, Masonry Restoration Workers, Operating Engineers, Sheet Metal Workers, and Tilesetters

WISHA noise Web site

<http://www.lni.wa.gov/Safety/Topics/AtoZ/NoiseHearing/default.asp>

OSHA noise Web site

<http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/constructionnoise/>

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UNION BUG



University of Washington
School of Public Health
and Community Medicine

Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences
Box 357234, Seattle WA 98195-7234



**NOISE ON THE JOB
can damage your hearing**

CONSTRUCTION WORKERS