

If you have to raise your voice you need to protect your ears

New laws will slash by half the maximum noise exposure to employees.

Nicola Coote, director of Aylesford-based Personnel Health and Safety Consultants, explains what employers must do before April.

If you need to raise your voice to be heard at one metre, you are likely to need a noise assessment.

This will tell you what the noise level is and whether your business will be affected by legislation that comes into effect this April.

So, what's different?

The main change is that the maximum acceptable noise threshold has been reduced by 5db(A).

Because noise measurement is on a logarithmic scale, this means more than a 50 per cent reduction. Every 3db(A) represents a doubling or halving of noise.

The new noise levels are 80 dB(A) for the First Action Level (down from 85dB(A), and 85 dB(A) for the Second Action Level (down from 90dB(A)).

Employers must also provide audiometric testing to employees who are exposed to 85dB(A) or more over a typical eight-hour day.

Until now, this has been good practice rather than mandatory.

The downside is more cost and administration for the employer.

But the good thing is that it will enable employers to monitor whether they are adequately protecting their workers and it will strengthen



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the employer's defence against any subsequent compensation claims for deafness.

Employers will have to:

■ Carry out a noise assessment when they suspect that noise levels exceed 80dB(A).

Such a level is the same as two persons having to raise their voices to be heard when they are one metre apart (at present this is only required if the noise level is 85 dB(A)).

What happens if the First Action Level is exceeded?

■ Noise exposure should be reduced, so far as is reasonably practicable, by engineering means such as quieter machinery and soundproofing.

■ Hearing protectors (ear plugs or muffs) must be readily available.

■ Employees must be given information about hearing protectors, how to obtain them and what to do with them.

The wearing of hearing protection is not compulsory if the noise level is in the First Action Level but it should be readily available and employees informed of how they can obtain it.

If Second or Peak Action Level is exceeded hearing protectors must be supplied and employees have to wear them. The employer must enforce wearing.

Hearing protection zones must be created by use of signs, and employees must wear hearing protection within the zones.

Noise exposure should be reduced by engineering means, as far as reasonably practicable.

Information, instruction and training must be provided covering the following topics:

■ An explanation of how noise can damage hearing.

■ Company policies designed to minimise risk.

■ How to use hearing protectors.

■ Obligations on workers to cooperate and report any problem.

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