Q+A Harmful noise

When is noise at the workplace harmful?

Noise at the workplace is harmful if you are exposed for eight hours a day to a noise level that averages more than 80 decibels. If this is the case, your employer must take measures to protect you.

Harmful noise and average load

Whether noise is harmful or not depends on the length of time in a day during which you are exposed to a certain level of noise. The matter therefore concerns the average noise load to which you are exposed in the course of a day. For example, if you spend four hours a day working in an environment with a noise level of 90 decibels and another four hours working in an environment with a noise level of 75 decibels, the daily average to which you are exposed exceeds 80 decibels and is therefore harmful to your hearing.

Measures required starting from 80 decibels

Your employer must take appropriate protective measures if you are exposed on a daily basis at work to more than 80 decibels. If the daily noise level is more than 85 decibels, you must wear hearing protection.

How can you tell if the noise level at your workplace is too high?

If you are exposed on a daily basis at work to an average noise level of more than 80 decibels, your employer must take appropriate measures. Measurements must be taken to determine workplace noise levels. If this has not yet been done you can apply the following rule of thumb: if you can have a conversation in a normal tone of voice with someone standing a metre away, the ambient noise level is not harmful and is less than 80 decibels.

Harmful noise

The ambient noise level is harmful if:

1. you have to speak loudly to make yourself understood even though you are not far away from the person to whom you are speaking;
2. a ringing or whistling tone is sounding in your ears when you leave work;
3. you have difficulty hearing a conversation or television programme in the first few hours after you have left work.

What can you do to protect yourself from harmful noise at work?

Your employer can be held liable if he does not take all possible measures to prevent hearing damage among employees. You and your employer can take a number of measures.

Protective measures against harmful noise
• Your employer must provide hearing protection starting from a noise level of 80 decibels. You are obliged to wear such hearing protection starting from a noise level of 85 decibels. Your employer must take additional measures at 87 decibels.
• Your employer must inform you about the risks of harmful noise and about hearing protection.
• Starting from an average noise level of 85 decibels, your employer must prepare a plan of action. This plan must indicate the measures taken by the employer to reduce noise levels. Such measures might include the purchase of quieter machinery or the installation of machinery in sound-insulating housings.
• Do not work for extended periods in environments with high noise levels. If the noise level is 80 dB(A), you can work for a whole day without using hearing protection. If you are exposed on a daily basis to more than 80 dB(A), hearing protection is required.
• Have your hearing checked regularly. You can have such checks carried out at least once every four years. Your employer will pay for them.