

Playing deaf to noise pollution

Written by Sheq Management

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Employees who work in an industry with high levels of noise pollution could potentially lose their hearing and suffer from severe stress, which increases heart rate and blood pressure. SHEQ MANAGEMENT looks at ways to prevent and reduce noise pollution

Noise pollution is caused by loud sounds that distresses and could possibly harm the hearing of employees. Industries such as underground mining and trade workshops with heavy equipment are especially susceptible to noise pollution, as these can generate noise levels above 85 dB.

Noise pollution can damage the structure of the hair cells in the ear, which could result in hearing loss. This is most often a gradual process. Workers in industries with high levels of noise pollution could also experience temporary hearing loss. However, noise pollution can also have non-auditory effects on employees.

Pieta van Deventer, director at HASS Industrial, explains: “Employees can get stressed when exposed to high noise levels, which will lead to health risks such as high blood pressure and an elevated heart rate.

“Stress can also lead to conflict between employees at the workplace, or with their family at home. Noise pollution could also cause sleeping disorders and a deterioration in mental health.”

According to Van Deventer, workers in a noise-polluted industry are also more at risk of workplace accidents. He says: “They may not hear any warning signals, or will simply not be able to think straight, due to the constant noise within their working environment.”

It is, therefore, important for these industries to reduce or prevent noise pollution as much as possible. Companies can start by implementing engineering control measures to eliminate or reduce noise at its source.

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The decibel level of the noise in the workplace can also be measured. This should be done by an occupational hygienist certified by the Southern African Institute for Occupational Hygiene (SAIOH).

Van Deventer advises: “Check the equipment to make sure it is operating properly. Provide hearing protection and education to the employees on noise pollution. Employees should also be regularly tested for hearing loss when they are exposed to high levels of noise pollution.”

By law, an employer should ensure the hearing of employees is protected and that workers are taught about their rights regarding hearing protection. Employees should also undergo an annual hearing test.

If there is a change in the environment, such as the introduction of new equipment, benchmark hearing tests might also have to be undertaken. Tests should take place more frequently (around every six months) if the noise levels in the workplace exceeds 105 dB. Companies should also actively try to reduce the number of employees exposed to the noise and the duration of exposure by rotating personnel.

However, employees are ultimately responsible for adhering to regulations set out by the employer. Van Deventer notes that while some industries are very prone to noise pollution, everyone is exposed to some noise pollution.

“We should consciously look after our hearing, as noise does not occur solely in the workplace, but forms part of our daily lives. Hearing conservation starts with the company, which should be proactive and discuss the possible noise issues with a support partner, such as HASS Industrial, to help with the management of noise levels and protecting the hearing of the employees,” he concludes.