OHS You and your work place

# Noise Exposure and Workplace Health & Safety

Hearing loss, both temporary and permanent, due to noise exposure can be a major health and safety concern for teachers. Music, physical education and technology education teachers are especially vulnerable to this injury; however, all teachers are potentially exposed to excessive noise and may be at risk of damaging their hearing.

Excessive noise damages tiny sensory cells deep inside the ear and hearing loss can occur so gradually that you may not realize it is happening. Further, the adverse health effects of noise are not restricted to hearing loss but may include interference with communication, loss of concentration, decreased level of job performance, sleep deprivation, and various physiological responses that can result in discomfort or in the development of diseases.

The length of exposure to noise is as critical as the volume. Although students may be exposed to the same or even higher noise levels while in some classes, the duration of their noise exposure is usually much shorter than that of teachers who may teach several periods of the same class in a day. Consequently, the risk of hearing loss due to noise exposure in some classrooms may be potentially significant for teachers but not as likely for students.

In Nova Scotia, the Workplace Health and Safety Regulations govern occupational noise exposure and limits such exposure to 85 decibels averaged over eight hours. However, a simple way to test the noise level is to stand at arm's length from someone and talk to him or her. If you must raise your voice to be heard, the noise around you is probably excessive. Further, if your ears ring or sounds seem muffled after the noise stops, your hearing has been affected, at least temporarily.

While workplace design is the best way to decrease noise exposure, other ways to reduce noise exposure include relatively simple measures such as using hearing protection equipment like earplugs to more complicated solutions such as installing sound-absorbent materials on walls or ceilings. Another option may be to have a sound-level survey conducted in the workplace in order to assess noise levels. If necessary, a noise dosimeter can be used to measure the noise exposure to which an individual is subjected over a period of time.

If you believe noise is a problem at your workplace, you should first bring your concerns to the attention of your principal/supervisor. If you are not satisfied with your principal's/supervisor's response, you should then bring your concerns to the Joint Occupational Health and Safety (JOHS) Committee and ask the Committee to make specific recommendations to the principal/supervisor in writing. The principal/supervisor has to respond within 21 days. Finally, if the JOHS Committee has not addressed your concerns adequately, you may bring your concerns to an Officer with the Occupational Health and Safety Division of the Nova Scotia Department of Labour.

The NSTU encourages its members to be proactive in creating and maintaining a safe and healthy work environment and to contact their NSTU Staff Officer for assistance at any time. An NSTU Staff Officer can assist members in obtaining timely and effective responses from principals/supervisors, the JOHS Committee or the Department of Labour and can help ensure that a member's concerns are addressed in a satisfactory manner, or assist with the filing of a grievance, if necessary.

*(Sources: "Occupational Health and Safety Manual" (2008) British Columbia Teachers' Federation; "Student Worksafe 10-12: Resource for Teachers" (2013) Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia; Alberto Behar et al., "Noise Exposure of Music Teachers" (2004) 1 Journal of Occupational and Environmental Hygiene 243.)*

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