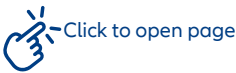


Preventing Industrial Deafness Guidebook

A collaborative publication by
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Introduction

Industrial deafness is one of Australia’s most common – and preventable – workplace illnesses. Yet claims are still rising, especially in noisy trades and logistics.

This guidebook aims to explain the risk, the legal obligations and practical steps that employers can take to protect their workers’ hearing.

It often starts with something small and easy to dismiss.

A worker realises they cannot quite follow a conversation in a crowded break room, or they keep asking colleagues to repeat themselves. For many, that can be the first sign of industrial deafness: noise-induced hearing loss caused not by a single dramatic incident, but by turning up to a noisy job day after day.



“Industrial deafness is not just another claims category. It is a life-changing injury that creeps up slowly, but may be prevented with the right controls.”



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What is industrial deafness?

Medically, the term is noise-induced hearing loss. In compensation schemes and everyday language, you will often see 'industrial deafness' or 'occupational deafness.' Whatever the label, it refers to permanent hearing damage caused by exposure to high levels of sound in the workplace.

Employers should know:

- It can be slow and painless, so remains invisible until it is advanced.
- Once it occurs, it is irreversible. Hearing aids can help but cannot restore normal hearing.
- With sensible controls, it may be prevented.

A useful rule of thumb, if someone must raise their voice to speak to a person one metre away, there is a good chance noise levels are high enough to cause damage over time.

Rising claims

Across Australia, overall incident rates for workplace injuries have generally declined. Industrial deafness is a striking exception.¹

Between 2013 and 2023, there was about one industrial deafness claim for every 2,000 workers. While overall injury rates fell by around 15%, industrial deafness claims rose by 29% over the same period,¹ primarily driven by long-term exposure to hazardous noise among trades, labourers and machine operators.

Industries most affected

The risk is not confined to heavy industry. Traditional high-noise sectors such as mining, manufacturing and construction remain prominent, but modern workplaces bring their own soundscape. Logistics warehouses, airports and freight terminals, call centres and hospitality and music venues all contribute.



Mining



Manufacturing and construction



Logistics warehouses



Airports and freight terminals



Call centres and hospitality



Music venues

In some settings, noise may be treated as background – something people “just deal with”. In reality, it is a hazard that needs to be managed like any other.



The impact

The economic and human impact is substantial, the projected total economic loss associated with industrial deafness in Australia over 10 years exceeds \$26Bn, including lost productivity and diminished well-being.²

When a worker loses their hearing, they do not just lose a sense. They can lose confidence, social connection and, in some cases, their place at work. For employers, preventing that harm is both a legal duty and the right thing to do.

Requirements by law

Across Australia, employers or persons conducting a business **must eliminate risks from hazardous noise** so far as is reasonably practicable or, if that is not possible, minimise them. They must also ensure workers are not exposed above the noise exposure standard, typically defined as an **average of 85 decibels** over an eight-hour working day and a **peak sound pressure level of 140 decibels**.

Where workers are exposed to conditions that could affect their hearing, employers must monitor their health. Under the Model Work Health and Safety Regulations, most jurisdictions require audiometric testing for workers who require hearing protection to remain below the exposure standard. This is required within three months of the worker commencing duties; and at least every two years thereafter.



Pushing the sound barriers: noise should not exceed the Noise Exposure Standard which is:

- **85 decibels average over eight hours:** Like spending your whole shift next to a vacuum cleaner, a food blender or heavy city traffic.
- **140 decibels peak exposure:** Comparable to an aircraft carrier deck or fireworks going off.



“Employers should read and apply the Noise Code of Practice for their jurisdiction (or in Victoria, the Compliance Code). This Noise Code is the best place to start in understanding your legal obligations and best practice for reducing risk of industrial deafness and noise induced hearing loss.”

Prevention using a Risk Management approach

Employers can reduce the risk of noise-induced injuries by developing and implementing a proactive and systematic approach to managing workplace noise.

Safety Regulations and Codes of Practice recommend using a Risk Management approach which includes four steps.

1. Identifying noise hazards (legal requirement)

- Employers can find noise sources by talking to workers and checking the workplace. Look for loud items like headphones, engines, and machinery. If you need to shout to be heard from a metre away, it might be too noisy.
- Have a competent person in your workplace use a noise level meter to measure sound.
- Consider using the Noise Hazard Identification Checklist from the Noise Codes of Practice to help spot risks.

2. Assessing the risks (may be legally required)

A risk assessment evaluates the level of risk of injury or illness from noise and is done by asking two questions:

- What could happen (e.g., temporary or permanent hearing damage)?
- What's the likelihood of that consequence?

Reminder: Do a risk assessment if it will help decide on controls, but **don't** delay simple solutions.

For complex noise issues or workplaces where workers are moving in and out of noisy areas, consider engaging a qualified specialist like an occupational hygienist or acoustic consultant.



3. Controlling the risks (legal requirement)

Once you understand where and how noise is affecting workers, apply controls. The idea here is to tackle and eliminate noise at its source before relying on human behaviour, supervision or less effective options.

Some examples:

- Change the way work is carried out – relocate noisy equipment into sound-insulated enclosures.

If you can't eliminate the hazards and risks, seek to reduce them by using strategies like:

- **Isolation:** Separate workers from noise by using distance, barriers or screens, soundproof covers.
- **Substitution:** Replace an old noisy piece of equipment with a modern low-noise model that operates below the exposure standard of 85dB.
- **Engineering controls:** Move workstations, install barriers or screens, or enclose particularly loud plant.
- **Engineering:** Modify plant, equipment, and processes to reduce noise, use sound absorbing or soundproofing materials.
- **Administrative controls:** Rotate tasks, limit time in noisy areas.
- **Personal protective equipment (PPE):** Earplugs and earmuffs.

PPE

While PPE has an important role, it should, however, be seen as the last layer of defence. When you do rely on PPE, it needs to be matched to the noise level and task, properly fitted and supported by training. Workers need to understand not just how to use the protection, but why it matters.

- Various types of PPE are available for different noise environments and worker needs. Consider noise level, exposure duration, comfort, and compatibility with other PPE.
- Earmuffs are suitable for high-noise areas and come in over-the-head, behind-the-neck, and helmet-mounted styles.
- Some earmuff models offer electronic noise-cancelling features and communication capabilities.
- Earplugs are lightweight, discreet, and available in disposable foam, reusable silicone, and custom-moulded options.
- Professional fitting of earplugs, especially custom-moulded or reusable types, is recommended for optimal protection.



4. Maintaining/reviewing control measures over time (a legal requirement)

Noise controls are not “set and forget.” As plant, processes and staffing change, so does your workplace noise profile. Controls need to be maintained, and their effectiveness monitored and reviewed over time.

There are particular instances when controls must be reviewed as a legal requirement (see your jurisdictions regulations and code of practice).

Common methods of review include consultation with workers, workplace inspection, testing and analysing records and data.

Workplace inspections can include checking that:

- Enclosures are intact.
- Barriers have not been removed or bypassed.
- Quieter tools have not been replaced with louder stand-ins.
- Hearing test results are monitored for early signs of emerging problems.

If problems are found, go back through the risk management process to control risks.



Build a culture that values hearing

In many industries, there is a long-standing belief that noise is part of the job. Time pressure, production targets and discomfort can all undermine the consistent use of hearing protection.

The culture piece is critical. If supervisors do not model safe behaviour or if people feel rushed, even the best-designed controls will not deliver the protection they should.

Educate your employees about noise-induced hearing loss and its long-term effects. Provide them with information, training, instruction, and supervision. The key is to ensure they're aware of the risks, using regular reinforcement to help avoid complacency or the perception that they aren't at risk of hearing damage.

Consult your workers

Excessive noise is a hazard that must be proactively managed by employers. For employers, 'noise management' can begin with listening – to your workers and to your workplace.

- Involve workers at all stages of identifying and managing noise risks; their input is crucial.
- Consultation means asking for workers' opinions before making decisions, not just informing them afterwards.
- Formal consultation can happen through representatives, committees, or surveys.
- Informal consultation includes chats with workers or group discussions.
- Keep records of consultations to manage risks effectively and show compliance with legal requirements.



What to do if you have an industrial deafness claim?

Industrial deafness claims are usually made against the most recent noisy employer, even when a worker's exposure has built up across several jobs. If a worker lodges an industrial deafness claim you should follow the steps below:

- 1. Acknowledge the claim promptly** and respond to any immediate concerns they raise.
- 2. Notify your insurer.** Industrial deafness claims can be complex, and many are handled by specialist case managers who will guide the process and advise on information requirements.
- 3. Cooperate with your insurer to investigate the claim.**
- 4. Consider safety implications.** Use the claim as an opportunity to conduct a review of noise hazards within your business. Check whether your noise management is as robust as you think, check your assessments are up to date, check controls are working as intended and whether your legal obligations are being met.



References

1. Safe Work Australia Data Set, includes preliminary data, unpublished, current as May 2025
2. Si, S., Lewkowski, K., Fritschi, L., Heyworth, J., Liew, D., & Li, I. (2020). Productivity burden of occupational noise-induced hearing loss in Australia: A life table modelling study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(13), 4667. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17134667>