

Hearing Protection

Earmuffs

"What did you say?"

Let me get my earmuffs on, so I can hear you." This remark may seem strange if you're not in the habit of wearing hearing protection. But in a noisy workplace where you have to strain to hear someone two feet away, hearing protection is not only necessary to protect your hearing, it can also help you hear the sounds you want to hear. Earmuffs and other protective devices enable you to pick out sounds from a background of noise in much the same way that sunglasses help you see objects in glaring sunlight.

Earmuffs— Who Needs Them?

If your employer has made earmuffs or earplugs available to you, the usual noise level in your workplace probably exceeds 85 decibels—and that's loud enough to damage your hearing over time. When there is a choice of hearing protectors, the choice you make depends on several factors, such as comfort, loudness of noise, and whether the noise is consistently loud. Earmuffs are easier to put on and take off than earplugs, and so are the best choice if you do need them all the time. However they are bulky and relatively expensive, and may not fit well with other protective equipment such as hard hats, respirators and eyeglasses. If you work in a very noisy environment, you may need to use earmuffs and earplugs together for added protection.

The Typical Earmuff

Earmuffs consist of cushioned cups attached to a headband that may be worn over the head, behind the neck or under the chin. Cups are made of molded plastic and filled with foam or similar material. They should adjust up and down, in and out, for a good fit. Cushions filled with foam, liquid or air cover the cups and completely seal

them around the ears. Specialized models are available: cap-mounted earmuffs can be attached to safety hats; dielectric earmuffs (for workers exposed to high voltage) do not have metal parts; and electronic earmuffs reduce hazardous noises while magnifying sounds you need to hear. Earmuffs reduce noise about 20 to 30 decibels; the Noise Reduction Rating (NRR) on your earmuffs indicates their effectiveness.

Effectiveness Depends on Fit

Your earmuffs should fit comfortably, the headband neither too tight nor too slack. To work right, earmuffs must form a seal around the ears, completely enclosing them, without pinching the earlobes. No hair or clothing should stick out from under the cups. Your eyeglasses may need to be modified to fit with earmuffs. Follow manufacturer's instructions for cleaning and storage, and replace hardened, cracked or worn cushions.

When properly used, alone or in combination with earplugs, earmuffs can be an effective way to protect your hearing. For the best protection, have your hearing tested at least once a year and compared to previous tests, understand the effects of noise on your hearing, and wear your earmuffs whenever your job requires them. 

