

# Audiometric Testing: A Guide for Employers

As an employer, you have a duty of care to protect and preserve the hearing of workers exposed to hazardous workplace noise. This may include regular audiometric testing.



## Noise in the workplace

Noise exposure is the most common preventable cause of occupational hearing loss. Workers are at risk of hearing loss whenever they are exposed to noise that exceeds the national exposure standard, which is:

- an average of 85 decibels over 8 hours (e.g. repetitive noise from equipment and machinery around the workplace), or
- a peak of 140 decibels (e.g. one-off impact noise such as a sledgehammer blow or gunshot).

As an employer you have a duty to ensure the exposure standard is not exceeded and, where possible, eliminate risk entirely. You can do this by:

- utilising control measures to reduce noise levels,
- decreasing the amount of time workers spend exposed to noise, and
- ensuring you understand and abide by relevant safety regulations in your state or territory (refer to your local Work Health and Safety Regulator for more details).

If a worker is required to frequently wear personal hearing protection to protect them from noise above the noise exposure standard, you must provide them with regular audiometric testing.

## Why audiometric testing?

Noise induced hearing loss is irreversible. It can also be difficult to detect, especially in its early stages.

Audiometric testing is a type of hearing test that can measure a worker's ability to hear quiet sounds and, when done regularly, can detect changes in their hearing over time.

Providing regular audiometric testing for noise-exposed workers can help employers:



### Minimise productivity loss

Addressing hearing loss early can reduce presenteeism and absenteeism<sup>1</sup>, and enable you to make adjustments that improve workforce participation.



### Prevent workplace accidents

If hearing loss is identified through audiometric testing, you can adjust the delivery of safety warnings and alerts (e.g. visual warning devices).

## Who should receive testing?

When workers are regularly required to wear hearing protection (such as earplugs or earmuffs) to protect against workplace noise that exceeds the exposure standard, you must provide audiometric testing:

- 1 Within three months of commencing work (often called 'baseline' or 'reference' audiometry), and
- 2 At least every two years from then on (known as 'monitoring')

**Baseline tests** provide a measure of hearing ability prior to commencing work. **Monitoring tests** identify any changes to a worker's hearing over time.


Some workers, such as those who work around explosive sounds, may need more frequent monitoring. Legal requirements for audiometric testing vary across Australia, so be sure to check with your state or territory Work Health and Safety regulator for more information.


Audiometric testing should always be conducted in conjunction with other noise hazard control and risk management activities. An Occupational Hygienist or other work health and safety professional can provide additional support if needed.

## The testing process

As an employer, you must organise audiometric testing on behalf of your workers<sup>^</sup>. Testing is quick and easy, and takes about 20 minutes per person to complete.

Audiometric testing can be conducted onsite (pending availability of a suitable, quiet space), or at a local hearing or medical centre. Testing must be overseen by an appropriately trained professional, and take place in a quiet (preferably soundproof) room away from other noise sources<sup>2</sup>.

 If undergoing a baseline test, workers must not be exposed to workplace noise for at least 16 hours before their test.

 If testing is for monitoring purposes, the test should be conducted during or at the end of a work shift to detect any temporary changes in hearing.

## Did you know?

Audiometric testing is different to the free hearing screenings you might find in shopping centres, pharmacies, and other locations. Free screenings may not meet legislative requirements, and can't always detect small changes in hearing over time.

As a minimum, workers should be tested using Pure Tone Audiometry. This is the most common method for measuring the quietest sound a worker can hear at different pitches.

## After testing

The results of audiometric testing are strictly confidential. The tester should inform each worker of their results during the appointment. They will provide you with the results for all participating workers, only where the worker has provided written consent to the release of their medical information.

After receiving the results, you must:

- Provide each worker with a copy of their test results (including instructions for follow-up if hearing loss has been detected), and
- Securely store test results (to maintain worker confidentiality).

If audiometric testing indicates a change in hearing, the worker should be referred for a full assessment with an audiologist.

## Supporting workers with hearing loss

Workers with hearing loss may need some additional support in the workplace. You can help by discussing their communication needs, making adjustments to the work environment (e.g. adding visual warning signs), or supporting them to use assistive technology at work (e.g. hearing aids or alerting devices).

When considering reasonable workplace adjustments for workers with hearing loss, be sure to check your obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992.

To book audiometric testing for your workers or find out more about noise induced hearing loss, visit:



<sup>^</sup> Legal requirements for audiometric testing vary across Australia, so be sure to check with your state or territory regulator for more information. <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/law-and-regulation/whs-regulators-and-workers-compensation-authorities-contact-information>

1. Si, S et al (2020), "Productivity Burden of Occupational Noise-Induced Hearing Loss in Australia: A Life Table Modelling Study", International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, Jul; 17(13): 4667

2. Standards Australia, AS NZS 1269.4-2014 Occupational noise management – Auditory assessment, <https://www.standards.org.au/>