

Fact sheet

Audiometric testing requirements

September 2023

From January 1, 2024, persons conducting a business or undertaking (PCBUs) will be required to provide audiometric testing to workers who are required to frequently wear hearing protection at work.

Consecutive exemptions were granted under the Work Health and Safety Regulations 2017 requiring PCBUs to conduct audiometric testing in accordance with clause 58.

The latest of these exemptions (No. 021/21) commenced on 1 January and remains in effect until 31 December 2023. But from 1 January 2024, the exemption will end.

What is audiometric testing?



Figure 1: Audiometric testing is a hearing test that measures the hearing threshold level of each ear

The test is painless and non-invasive. It measures a person's ability to hear different sounds, pitches and frequencies. During the procedure, the person tested is usually seated in a soundproof enclosure or booth, wearing headphones. The person is asked to press a button every time they hear a sound through the headphones.

Results of testing can be used to identify any changes in hearing levels over time.

Testing should be undertaken by a qualified person such as an audiologist, in accordance with AS/NZS 1269.4:2014 Occupational noise management – Auditory assessment.

The test results are provided to the person immediately after the test with an explanation of the results.

Why is audiometric testing important?

Exposure to hazardous noise in the workplace can lead to occupational health issues such as temporary or permanent hearing loss, tinnitus and communication difficulties. Hearing loss is typically painless and workers may not be aware if they have been impacted by workplace noise. Damage to hearing can occur gradually when exposed to excessive noise over a long period of time or can occur immediately after exposure to a loud noise source for a relatively short period of time.

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The occurrence of hearing loss can be temporary, where hearing may be restored after time away from the noise source. However, with continued exposure to hazardous noise, the ability of the ear to recover diminishes and hearing loss can become permanent. The amount of hearing loss that occurs depends on several factors such as how loud the noise is, the duration of exposure, the frequency, pitch, and the varying susceptibility of individuals.

Hearing loss can also be caused or made worse by a person's exposure to certain chemicals called ototoxic substances, which includes some solvents, heavy metals and asphyxiants. These substances can be absorbed into the body and cause damage to parts of the inner ear and auditory nerve. Exposure to ototoxins can make the ear more sensitive to the harmful effects of noise, which may result in tinnitus (ringing in the ears) and can lead to subsequent hearing loss.

Further information on noise induced hearing loss and ototoxic substances can be found in the Safe Work Australia code of practice Managing noise and preventing hearing loss at work (July 2020).

A PCBU's duty to provide audiometric testing

Under clause 58 of the WHS Regulation a PCBU audiometric testing must be provided by a PCBU:

- when a worker is frequently required by the PCBU to wear hearing protection at work as a control measure to protect them from noise-related hearing loss from noise that exceeds the noise exposure standard.

The exposure standard for noise is defined as:

- an 8-hour equivalent continuous noise level of 85 dB(A), $L_{Aeq,8h}$ 85 dB(A), or
- a peak sound level of 140 dB(C), $L_{C,peak}$ 140 dB(C).
- within 3 months of commencement of employment for new workers (baseline test)
- in any event, every 2 years (follow-up testing)
- more frequent testing may be required for workers exposed to high average noise levels during their work shifts (e.g., noise levels greater than 100 dB(A)).

After each hearing test is completed, it is the responsibility of the PCBU to:

- keep confidential records of the baseline and follow-up hearing tests for each worker
- review noise control measures in the workplace if a permanent threshold shift of hearing, or tinnitus is detected for a worker
- take reasonably practicable steps to modify the work environment for workers whose hearing loss interferes with the ability to perform work safely
- provide copies of the worker's hearing tests when their employment ends

Information in regard to audiology clinics in your local area can be found on the Audiology Australia website <https://audiology.asn.au/Home>.

Many audiometric testing services also provide mobile screening services which can undertake testing at your site.

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