SCREENINGS:
WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

If you are exposed to noise above 85 dBA on the job, you may be a candidate for a hearing test called a **baseline audiogram**. During the test, you'll hear a range of tones at different loudness levels. The audiogram creates a graphic record of your hearing ability, determining the lowest level for each frequency at which you can hear.

- Periodic audiograms follow, and the baseline audiogram becomes the basis of comparison to determine your hearing ability, if hearing loss has occurred and to what extent. If your hearing changes, the audiologist will figure out why, as well as conduct additional tests to determine if the change is temporary or permanent.
- The reviewer may ask about your general health and history. That's because other factors may affect hearing, including conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure, and a history of noise exposure and traumas of the ear, both on and off the job. Tell your reviewer about any ear problems or conditions, such as tinnitus (ringing in the ear), which may indicate overexposure to noise.
- All of the information provides the reviewer with insight into the probable causes of your hearing loss and enhances recommendations for follow-up and treatment to conserve your hearing. Sometimes medical referrals are necessary to determine the cause of hearing loss, and medical treatment can be an important next step. Medical intervention might be crucial to your health.

Remember: Hearing specialists recommend you have your hearing checked every two years, regardless of the conditions in which you work.

An audiogram is evaluated by an audiologist, a specialist certified in testing hearing and fitting hearing aids.

What Did You Say?

Have you ever asked a co-worker or companion to repeat something because you didn't hear him or her clearly? Some signs of hearing loss are subtle, while others are much more pronounced.

Subtle Clues to Hearing Loss:

- When away from work, do your ears feel plugged?
- In a quieter environment, do your ears have a mild ringing or whooshing noise that lasts for one to two hours?
- Do you have difficulty hearing a companion at arm's length?

Warning Signs of Hearing Loss:

- You hear buzzing in the ears.
- You do not hear well on the phone.
- You often ask people to repeat themselves.
- You have difficulty hearing someone speak in the presence of background noise.
- You don't hear the turn signal on an automobile you're driving.
- Voices don't sound clear to you.

Fact: Hearing loss is gradual, painless and can be permanent. Once it occurs, it's important to protect the hearing you have left. Otherwise, loud noises at work, at home or at play will continue to damage your hearing and make it more difficult to communicate with co-workers, family and friends.

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Preventing Hearing Loss

You Are Your First Line of Defense

Few medical conditions can isolate and distress a person as much as a hearing loss that goes undetected. The person may start feeling puzzled, then excluded — and ultimately even victimized by the people around him or her. This happens, slowly, to many people as they age. But it doesn't have to.

Country villagers in undeveloped nations have been shown to be able to hear a pin drop — far into old age. *The reason:* They live their whole lives in quiet environments. In this land, where we live with the benefits — and hazards — of heavy equipment, jackhammers, lawn mowers, leaf blowers, airplanes and rock music, it takes special care to keep your hearing sharp throughout your life. But it's really as simple as 1-2-3:

1. **Steer clear of loud noise.**
2. **Wear hearing protection to shield your ears.**
3. **Get your hearing tested.**

Serious Consequences at Work

Noise-induced hearing loss is the most common occupational injury/illness yet it is 100 percent preventable. Occupations and situations in which noises can occur above the danger zone (85-90 dBA), pose the biggest threat to people of all ages. Repeated exposure to loud noises can cause permanent, irreversible hearing loss.

Hearing Protectors

Hearing protection devices decrease the intensity of sound that reaches the eardrum. They include earplugs and earmuffs. ***Here's more:***

Foam plugs expand and conform to the shape of your ear canal. ***The right fit:*** A foam plug should be smooth enough so that half of it easily fits into and plugs the ear canal. Earplugs should be handled with clean hands; damaged and dirty plugs should be thrown away.

Pre-molded, reusable plugs are made from silicone, plastic or rubber. Some manufacturers offer them in one-size-fits-all, while others offer custom sizes. ***The right fit:*** Make sure you choose the right size for your ears. Try different models and sizes to see which one works the best. You know the plugs are correct when they seal the ear canal without feeling uncomfortable. Replace the plugs as soon as they become hard, torn or out of shape.

Canal caps/headband plugs resemble earplugs but are attached to a flexible plastic or metal band. Headbands can be worn over the head, behind the neck or under the chin. ***Important:*** Store carefully as bending or twisting may compromise protection.

Earmuffs block out noise by completely covering the outer ear when fitted correctly. ***The right fit:*** Earmuffs will not adequately seal the outer ear over long hair or when eyeglasses or safety glasses are worn. Replace the cushions if they become stiff, worn, cut or torn. Do not modify the muffs or protection will be lost.

Many factors figure into selecting the correct hearing protection: personal preference, nature of the work, noise level and physical considerations. Take care to select the right level of protection for you and the task at hand.

Most important: **WEAR IT.**

LISTEN UP!

Nine million workers are at risk of hearing loss as a result of skin contact with solvents such as styrene and metals such as lead. These agents enter the bloodstream and may damage the tissues of the inner ear. Combined exposure to noise and chemicals can cause more hearing loss than exposure to either alone.

What's Loud?

Whether you are working around the house or pursuing your favorite pastimes, it's wise to protect your hearing if you'll be exposed to loud noises such as:

Snowmobile	100 dBA
Snow blower	105 dBA
Power saw/leaf blower	110 dBA
Rock concert	100-120 dBA
Jackhammer/power drill	130 dBA
Stock car races	130 dBA
Firecracker	140+ dBA

How Does Hearing Loss Happen?

Loud noises damage the delicate hair cells in the inner ear. This damage happens gradually when prolonged exposure to loud sounds causes the hair cells to be injured, broken off or torn away. Because hair cells can't repair themselves, a hearing loss results.

Noise does not have to make your ears hurt to cause hearing damage.