



World Hearing Day Webinar “Safer Hearing for European Workers”

Date : 03/03/2022



Background information

World Hearing Day is held on 3 March each year to raise awareness on how to prevent deafness and hearing loss and promote ear and hearing care across the world. This year [theme](#) is “To hear for life, listen with care!”, aiming at spreading awareness that many common causes of hearing loss can be prevented, including occupational hearing loss.

To celebrate this day, the **European Safety Federation** (representing PPE industry at EU level) organized a **webinar dedicated to occupational hearing loss and prevention** - featuring Members of the European Parliament (MEP Marianne Vind, S&D Denmark, MEP Cindy Franssen, PPE, Belgium), the European Commission (DG EMPL), WHO and national experts on fit testing for fostering hearing protection and healthcare implications beyond hearing loss – the program of the webinar can be found [here](#).

Event report

The organiser of the webinar, the European Safety Federation, represented by its Secretary General Henk Vanhoutte and its President Alan Murray, welcomed the participants and introduced the theme of the webinar “Safer Hearing for European Workers”. Occupational hearing loss can occur when workers are exposed to loud noise or ototoxic chemicals. Every day, millions of employees in Europe are exposed to noise at work. While noise is most obviously a problem in industries such as manufacturing, agriculture and construction, it can also be an issue in a wide range of other working environments, from call centres to schools, orchestra pits to bars. One in five of Europe’s workers has to raise their voices to be heard for at least half of the time that they are at work.

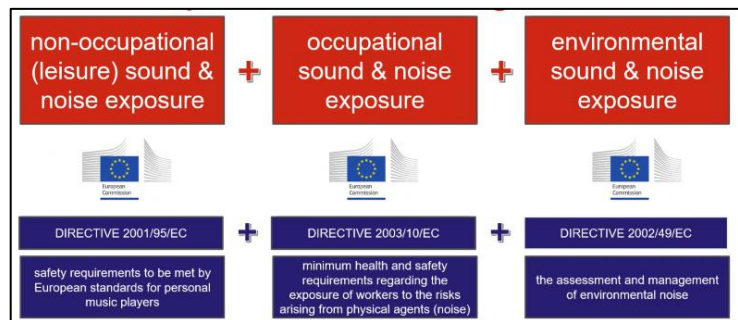
Hearing loss is on the rise: self-reported hearing problems have slightly increased in the past years. According to a European survey, 7 % of European workers consider that work affects their health in terms of hearing disorders.^[1] The effects are not immediate but over time. **Preventive measures can be so effective:** noise-induced hearing loss is still one of the most prevalent recognised occupational diseases.



^[1]) European Survey of Working Conditions, ESWC.

The European Safety Federation and its members have been working on this topic for long time, as the Federation represents personal protective equipment (PPE) suppliers and works on promoting health and safety at work, also looking at hearing protection for workers.

Two Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) opened the high-level panel discussion on occupational hearing loss. MEP Marianne Vind is a former Danish trade unionist and is a member of the Social Democrats group. She stressed the importance of raising awareness among policymakers on this invisible condition and she gave an overview on EU actions on occupational health and safety (OH&S). The EU provides a set of legislations and strategies on specific topics from chemical safety to explosion and noise level at a workplace. The EU workers can count on an extensive legislative framework on OH&S but often the lack of enforcement undermines its effectiveness.



On enforcement, MEP Cindy Franssen, former Member of the Flemish Parliament, now in the Group of the European People's Party, presented the new EU strategy framework on OH&S and the European Parliament call to increase funding for national labour inspectorates and implement the ILO recommendation of one labour inspector per 10 000 workers. On hearing loss, she stressed that over 22 million Europeans live with an untreated, disabling hearing loss, and that this effects both personal and professional life. Working from home has increased the use of headphones, some data show that 20% of the workforce have an increased risk of hearing loss. EU policymakers should advocate to make hearing loss a priority within OH&S measures.

WHO was represented by two speakers: Ayrton Hogan (Audiologist at the WHO hearing care programme) and **Mark Laureyns** (co-Chair of the Make listening safe committee of the World Hearing Forum and President of the association AEA - European Association of Hearing Aid Professionals). Ayrton Hogan provided some crucial statistics on occupational hearing loss: annually, 980 billion of US dollars are lost due to unaddressed hearing loss. This as a direct result of loss of productivity and of social isolation. Another key point raised is the thin border between noise exposure from leisure activities and work for those working in entertainment industry and in and recreational environment (e.g. event organizers, those working in a bar or a concert venue).

Exposure to loud noises is the second most common risk factor in the workplace (22% workplace related-health issues) and directly results in hearing loss. Occupational hearing loss is preventable. Many of the European countries implementing hearing conservation programmes report reduced hearing loss in workers. Conservation programmes includes monitoring noise levels, engineering and administrative measures to reduce noise exposure, personal hearing protective devices, medical surveillance and training programmes. Advocacy at EU and national level is so important to prevent occupational hearing loss.

Mark Laureyns presented the work of the WHO advocacy network [the World Hearing Forum](#), a global network of stakeholders promoting ear and hearing care worldwide. Members of this advocacy network commit to facilitating implementation of World Health Assembly resolution [WHA70.13](#) on "[Prevention of deafness and hearing loss](#)" and supporting Member States in this regard. Mark Laureyns also presented the WHO and WHF work on international standard for safe listening (WHO-ITU H. 870

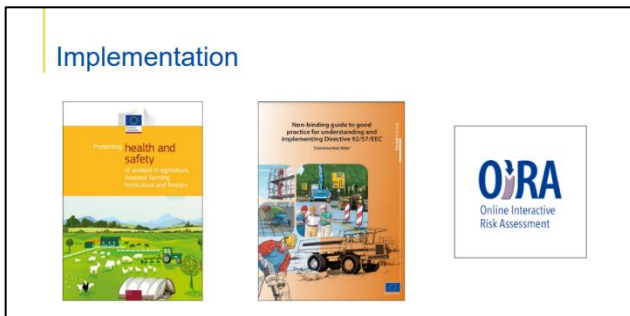
The WHO - ITU Safe Listening Standards:

- Standard safety level:** Limit sound exposure to 1,6 Pa²h = 80 dBA for 40 hours/week
- Equal Energy Principle:**
 - 83 dBA for 20 hours
 - 86 dBA for 10 hours
 - 89 dBA for 5 hours
- Higher safety level:** Limit sound exposure to 0,51 Pa²h = 75 dBA for 40 hours/week

The infographic also includes a bar chart showing exposure/dose levels and a screenshot of a smartphone app displaying average audio levels over the last seven days, indicating 'OK' status.

Global standard on safe listening devices and systems). To celebrate the World Hearing Day, the WHF has launched a new standard on 3rd March 2022 dedicated to events and venue.

The representative from the **European Commission (DG EMPL)**, Laura Vicente, gave some insights on the legislative framework on OH&S and the work of the EU Advisory Committee on Safety and Health and Work (ACSH) and the Senior Labour Inspectors Committee (SLIC) for its development and implementation. The European Commission has released two guidelines for OH&S implementation, also looking at exposure to noise.



The European Commission's presentation was followed by two technical presentations on hearing protector fit testing and health implication of hearing loss. **Fit testing education and**

training was presented by INAIL (the Italian Institute for Insurance against Accidents at Work) represented by Diego Annesi and Andrea Vestrucci. They presented a study, in collaboration with the University of Rome, on the impact of fit testing on hearing protection programmes. Fit testing can determine how effective a hearing protection device is for each worker, when worn correctly and it is carried out using specific testing software. Protective equipment cannot help protecting if it does not properly fit the users. Evidence shows that including fit testing as a part of employee training for correct hearing protection device use, increases workers' protection.

The webinar also saw the contribution of **Rob Shephard, Consultant Audiologist** at Spire Hospital UK and member of the UK Hearing Conservation Association, who presented health conditions linked to hearing loss, including dementia and cardiovascular diseases. Around 2% of cardiovascular disease deaths can be linked to noise, there is a 26% increased risks of coronary heart disease linked to traffic noise, and between 7% - 24% increased risk of stroke. Hearing loss is also a risk factor for cognitive decline and dementia (8% of worldwide dementia resulting from hearing loss). Rob Shephard also introduced the importance of medical surveillance on workers to intervene and prevent further injury.

More information on the World Hearing Day and WHO initiatives on hearing can be found at [World Hearing Day 2022 \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/world-hearing-day-2022)