

Getting personal hearing protection right: what really matters

Personal hearing protection is the last line of defence between your workers and permanent hearing damage. But poor management turns every pound spent on earmuffs and earplugs into wasted money.

“This isn’t about blame – it’s about recognising a key challenge,” explains Chris Steel, HSE’s Principal Specialist Inspector.

Personal protective equipment sits at the bottom of the hierarchy of control because it needs constant attention. Unlike engineering controls that work automatically, hearing protection requires ongoing information, instruction, training and supervision to stay effective.

From our inspections across workplaces in Great Britain, we’ve identified the crucial questions every employer should ask about their hearing protection programme. Get this right before inspectors visit, and you’ll be protecting your workforce properly.

Condition: is your protection actually protecting?

Hearing protection only works when it’s in good condition. Earmuffs with stretched headbands, missing foam padding, damaged seals or cracked cups give false security rather than real protection. These defects create gaps that let through harmful noise, potentially causing permanent hearing loss.

Single-use earplugs don’t work if workers treat them as reusable. Once removed – for breaks, conversations or toilet visits – they must be thrown away. Brief removal compromises their integrity and putting them back rarely achieves the same protective seal.

Reusable plugs come with issues of their own. During one site visit, Steel’s team met a worker still using moulded earplugs he’d been given at 18 – he was 43 when they spoke to him. Materials degrade over time, ear canals change, and effectiveness drops substantially. Do your workers know replacement schedules? More importantly, do they know how and where to get fresh protection when needed?

Use: making protection accessible

“Hearing protection is useless sitting in storage whilst workers operate noisy equipment,” Steel emphasises. Timing matters: protection must go on before exposure begins and stay on throughout the hazardous period.

Think about placement strategically. Steel has seen one factory manager leave an inspector at the entrance whilst he walked 100 metres to fetch his earplugs, then walked back before inserting them – defeating the purpose entirely. Put supplies where workers need them, when they need them.

Proper fitting: the devil in the detail

Even premium hearing protection fails when worn incorrectly. Earplugs need clean hands for hygienic insertion and proper technique to achieve effective sealing. Workers must understand how to straighten their ear canals during insertion – a skill requiring demonstration and practice.

Earmuffs seem foolproof until you see them worn over hats, hoods or hair accessories. These seemingly minor problems create significant gaps in protection. Helmet-mounted systems add complexity: you can't assume compatibility between helmet and earmuff systems just because components physically connect.

Individual differences matter enormously. Some workers can't use standard earplugs due to narrow ear canals or other physical factors. Regulations require employers to offer suitable alternatives, not force unsuitable solutions. Regular observation helps identify workers struggling with proper fitting, often showing the need for different protection types rather than more training.

Performance: matching protection to need

Effective hearing protection requires technical matching between workplace noise levels and protection capabilities. During one site visit, one employee had chosen earplugs based solely on their football team's colours – hardly acceptable performance criteria.

Understanding your workplace noise levels in decibels provides the foundation for proper specification. Each protection type has a Single Number Rating (SNR) showing its noise reduction capability. HSE's calculator tools and guidance help match protection performance to actual requirements.

Crucially, adequate protection shouldn't create new hazards. Over-protection can stop workers hearing essential warning alarms, creating safety risks that outweigh the benefits. Once workers wear hearing protection, check they can still detect critical safety signals.

The CUFF approach: systematic assessment

Managing hearing protection effectively requires systematic attention to four key elements – remember CUFF:

Condition: Regular inspection ensures protection remains physically capable of doing its job.

Use: Proper timing and accessibility enable consistent protection during hazardous activities.

Fit the ear: Correct wearing technique maximises the protection potential of well-chosen equipment.

Fit for purpose: Technical matching between hazard levels and protection capabilities ensures adequate safety without creating new risks.

Moving forward

Personal hearing protection demands active management rather than passive provision. The administrative burden reflects the serious consequences of failure: once hearing damage occurs, it can't be reversed.

Next time you walk around your workplace, think CUFF when observing hearing protection use. These real examples from our inspections show how easily well-intentioned programmes can fail without proper attention to detail.

The investment in proper hearing protection management pays dividends in reduced injury rates, improved compliance and enhanced workplace culture. Most significantly, it preserves something irreplaceable: your workers' ability to hear.

Noise: Management of exposure in the workplace – 28 October 2025

Protect your workforce from noise-induced hearing loss with [HSE's one-day training course on 28 October 2025 in Buxton](#), covering risk assessment and compliance with the Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005. Essential for health and safety practitioners, managers, and supervisors responsible for managing workplace noise risks.