



Public Health Command Europe

**PHCE**

## ***Questions & Answers for the Supervisor of Noise-Exposed Personnel***

### **What is occupational noise exposure?**

Occupational noise exposure is a common health hazard for workers exposed to potentially hazardous sound in the workplace. Noise exposure can result in hearing loss, tinnitus, and other harmful health effects. The extent of damage depends on the intensity of the noise and the duration of the exposure.

### **What is the Army Hearing Program (AHP)?**

The Army Hearing Program includes the hearing conservation program, hearing loss prevention and training, and clinical and operational hearing services. The hearing conservation program (HCP) is a multi-disciplinary endeavor designed to protect workers with significant occupational noise exposure from hearing impairment through environmental testing, education and training, evaluation, provision of hearing protection, regulation enforcement, teamwork and more.

### **How do we know if an employee is exposed to hazardous levels of noise?**

Industrial Hygiene performs sound level measurements to determine if employee work environment noise exposure averages at or above 85 decibels (dB A) over 8 working hours or an 8-hour time-weighted average (TWA); or if an employee is exposed to impulse, or very quick bursts of sound, of 140 dB P (peak) for any duration of exposure. If yes, the employee will be enrolled in the hearing conservation program. All Army Soldiers are included in the AHP regardless of noise-exposure.

Supervisors should contact Industrial Hygiene to repeat environmental noise evaluation whenever changes in production, process, or controls may increase noise exposure. Any changes may cause additional or fewer employees to be included in the program, or changes to hearing protectors worn to ensure adequate protection.

### **Who do I contact to have new employees added to the HCP?**

Occupational Health must be notified when a new employee begins work in an area with hazardous noise or an employee moves from one area to another. Supervisors should update and maintain current rosters of personnel occupationally exposed to hazardous noise. Rosters should be updated every 6 months. Supervisors should also verify employee position descriptions (PDs) are updated to reflect exposure to hazardous noise.



## ***Supervisor's guide to the Hearing Conservation Program***

### **What is audiometric testing?**

Audiometric testing is a measure of the softest sound a person can hear at different pitches without the use of hearing aids or amplification devices. Audiometric testing is an annual requirement for employees on the HCP. It is used to monitor an employee's current hearing compared to baseline exam to determine if decrease in hearing has occurred. Audiometric testing provides data for efficacy of the section's HCP and whether team or individual retraining or hearing protection refitting is needed.

### **What is a baseline/reference audiogram?**

The baseline or reference audiogram is typically the first test performed when an employee has been assigned to a noise hazardous area. Employees should in-process with Occupational Health in order to be added to the HCP and have a baseline audiogram completed. If an employee, after completing all follow-up hearing tests, has been determined to have a decrease in hearing, also known as a significant threshold shift (STS), the baseline will be changed. All future occupational hearing tests will be compared to this new baseline audiogram. Employees must be 14 hours noise-free before the baseline test.

### **Why are annual audiograms important?**

Hearing loss from occupational noise exposure is progressive, painless, permanent, and preventable. Most employees are unaware their hearing is being damaged from the exposure. The annual audiograms indicate whether an employee is experiencing hearing loss often years before the employee would notice a significant impact on speech understanding.

### **As a supervisor how do I support an employee if they experience an STS?**

Supervisors can ensure personnel on the HCP are made available for examination and attend scheduled medical appointments. Employees **must** complete follow-up testing within 30 days of STS detection. According to OSHA regulations and DOD guidelines, workers must be refitted and retrained, and if necessary given hearing protection devices (HPDs) that afford greater protection.



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### **What is a standard threshold shift (STS)?**

An STS is an average change of 10 dB or more (or total change of 30 dB or more) at 2,000, 3,000, and 4,000 Hertz in either ear from the baseline audiogram.

### **What happens after an STS is identified?**

Employees will be notified in writing if an STS has occurred and the need for additional testing. **They must return to the audiometric screening booth for a follow-up hearing exam within 30 days of initial detection. They must be a minimum of 14-hours noise-free for follow-up testing** The use of hearing protection does not meet the noise-free requirement. If the change in hearing persists, a referral for diagnostic testing may be warranted.

### **What is a DOD Recordable Hearing Loss (RHL)?**

A DOD RHL determination can only be made by a certified professional supervisor, audiologist, otolaryngologist, or qualified physician. A hearing loss is considered reportable if they meet the following criteria:

- \* An STS occurs (an average 10 dB or greater threshold decrease at 2, 3, and 4 kHz) in either ear from the reference audiogram.
- \* Hearing thresholds for the current hearing test are 25 dB or greater at 2, 3, and 4 kHz for the affected ear.
- \* Hearing loss is determined to be more likely than not related to occupational noise exposure.

### **Where are DOD RHL hearing losses reported?**

If the STS is determined to be DOD RHL, the employee and supervisor will be notified in writing. For noise-exposed civilians, DOD RHL hearing losses must be recorded on the OSHA Form 301 or local equivalent. A safety officer can assist you with the process. Workman compensation may be handled by CPAC. Please defer to local policy.

### **When is the employer required to provide hearing protection devices (HPDs)?**

Employers must provide hearing protectors to all workers exposed to 8-hour TWA noise levels of 85 dBA or above or anyone exposed to levels over 140 dBP. Employers must ensure the employees working in these noise hazardous environments are wearing their hearing protection properly. Proper fit and consistent use of hearing protection around hazardous noise is one of the best ways to prevent hearing loss. Employers must provide employees with a selection of at least one variety of hearing plug and one variety of hearing muff.



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### **Which HPDs are the best?**

The best hearing protector is the one that is fitted correctly and worn when required. Employees and personnel trained to fit HPD should discuss which size and type of HPD is most suitable for the work environment. The HPD selected should be comfortable to wear and offer sufficient protection to prevent hearing loss. Hearing protectors must adequately reduce the noise level for each employee's work environment. Ensure that all workers are complying with DODI 6055.12 and AER 40-501 by wearing the appropriate hearing protection at all times when exposed to hazardous noise.

### **How often is training is required?**

Employers must train employees at least **annually**. Employees who understand the reason they are in the hearing conservation program will be more motivated to participate in the program by wearing hearing protection and attending required annual hearing exams.

### **What are the mandatory training topics?**

The mandatory training topics include: the effects of noise; the purpose, advantages, and disadvantages of various types of hearing protectors; the selection, fit, and care of protectors; and the purpose and procedures of audiometric testing.

Additional hearing health education topics may include: an overview of the Army Hearing Program; the mechanisms of hearing loss and the impact of hearing loss on communication; and hearing loss prevention tactics.

### **Who can conduct the hearing health education brief?**

Personnel well-versed in all components of the AHP may serve as qualified instructors. Qualified instructors include:

- \* The Army Hearing Program Office
- \* Preventative medicine professionals
- \* Occupational Health nurses
- \* Safety Officers
- \* DOD certified hearing technicians or hearing program officers

Online training is also available via the link below:

- \* [https://www.milsuite.mil/university/hearing\\_center\\_of\\_excellence/courses/annual-hearing-conservation-education/](https://www.milsuite.mil/university/hearing_center_of_excellence/courses/annual-hearing-conservation-education/)



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### **What are the annual training documentation requirements?**

A log of all individuals trained must be maintained in order to adhere with OSHA and AER 40-501 regulations. Training may be documented on a roster or in DTMS. If tracking using DTMS, please use **DTMS Code: Task Number: 081-68U-0011, Task Name: Conduct Hearing Loss Prevention Education.**

### **Is participation in the AHP mandatory?**

Yes - if an employee's work environment is found to be noise hazardous, they must be enrolled in the HCP. Their supervisors and employers must participate by ensuring they and their noise-exposed personnel adhere to all HCP regulations. Non-compliance can result in disqualification from duties or disciplinary action up to and including removal.

Supervisors or unit commanders should include AHP responsibilities in the first-line DA Civilian supervisor's performance standards (see AR 385–10). Soldiers and DA Civilian employees under their supervision will actively participate in the HCP by—

- \* Obtaining annual DOEHRS–HC monitoring audiometry for hearing readiness or hearing conservation, as required.
- \* Completing follow-up hearing testing, as required, when changes in hearing are detected.
- \* Wearing approved and properly-fitted hearing protectors when exposed to noise hazards.
- \* Participating in annual hearing health education training.

### **Can participation in the AHP be included in an employee's performance evaluation?**

Yes! Supervisors and/or unit commanders must ensure that the aforementioned responsibilities are included in the support forms of noise-exposed Soldiers and the performance plans of noise-exposed DA Civilians.

Supervisors may include the mandatory requirement of assigned protective equipment and/or any administrative actions for failure to wear protective equipment.



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### **What can I do if an employee refuses to participate in the AHP?**

If a DA Civilian employee violates hearing protector requirements or fails to comply with audiometric evaluation procedures and/or hearing health education training, the employee's supervisor will apply appropriate disciplinary action in accordance with AR 690–700.

AR 690–700 lists appropriate penalties for failure to observe written regulations, orders, rules, or procedures. The table of penalties for various offenses range from a written reprimand to permanent removal, depending on the safety risk and the number of times the failure occurs.

Army major command or activity regulations and policies or collective bargaining agreements may also apply.

### **As a supervisor, what are my main responsibilities?**

Enforce the use of properly-fitted hearing protection by all noise-exposed personnel under your supervision and take disciplinary action, as appropriate, for noncompliance.

Ensure that all noise-exposed personnel under your supervision complete required hearing conservation monitoring audiometry and hearing health education.

Set the example by always using hearing protection where required, receiving hearing tests, as appropriate, and attending annual hearing health education training.

### **How does the HCP apply to Local Nationals?**

IAW AER 40-11, the USAREUR Occupational Health Services Contract will meet regulatory OH requirements for LN employees. In cases of conflict between U.S. and German law on exposure standards and medical surveillance, all German standards and requirements must be met. When U.S. standards are stricter than German standards, the U.S. standards will be used when all the following apply:

- (1) Applying the U.S. standards is more practical.
- (2) Use of the U.S. standards has been agreed to by the appropriate works council (local or HWC).
- (3) The implementation and use of U.S. standards has been coordinated with the OH-service contractor.

While audiometric monitoring is performed by the BAD office, all other requirements are covered under the AHP.



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### **Who can I contact if I have any questions about the Army Hearing Program?**

The Army Hearing Program is the main point of contact for any questions related to hearing conservation. Questions may be answered by emailing [usarmy.ahp.phce@mail.mil](mailto:usarmy.ahp.phce@mail.mil) .

Information about the AHP and our courses are regularly updated on our website <https://rhce.amedd.army.mil/phce/ArmyHearingProgram.html> .

### **Additional Resources and References:**

29 CFR 1910.95, Occupational Noise Exposure

29 CFR 1904.10 Recording criteria for cases involving occupational hearing loss.

AER 40-501, Army Hearing Program in Europe

AER 40-11, Local National Employee Occupational Health Services Contract

AR 40-5, Preventive Medicine

AR 385-10, The Army Safety Program

AR 690–700, Personnel Relations and Services

DA-PAM 40-501, Army Hearing Program

DODI 6055.07, Mishap Notification, Investigation, Reporting and Record Keeping

DODI 6055.12, DOD Hearing Conservation Program

