

YOUR GOOD HEALTH

SHHH! America's most common workplace injury is hearing loss

By Zhai Yun Tan
Kaiser Health News

Eight years ago, Jeff Ammon, now 55, began noticing a feeling of pressure in his ears every day after work.

Over the next months, when his symptoms progressed into a slight loss of hearing and sensitivity to noise, he became worried. Ammon, a construction worker for 32 years, eventually started wearing ear protection hoping this would address these complaints — but it was too late.

From that point on, sounds ranging from the hum of a lawnmower to normal tones of conversation caused a piercing, jabbing pain in his inner ear. He stopped working in 2011, when the pain became unbearable. He also hears ringing in his ears and experiences dizziness, both side effects of the auditory damage.

"It's debilitating ... completely," he said.

Ammon spent almost all of his working life surrounded by the loud noises of jackhammers, saws and air compressors. Now he avoids going outdoors, choosing instead to stay in his soundproof basement in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, and communicate with his doctor mostly through an online patient portal.

"The medication to address pain has not been very successful at all. ... I'm also on some medication for stress, anxiety and depression," he said. "It has isolated me from society."

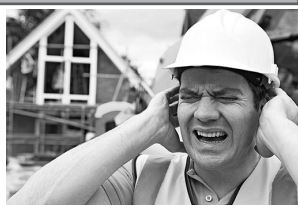
Ammon is not alone in suffering from workplace-related hearing loss. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it is the most common work-related injury with approximately 22 million workers exposed annually to hazardous levels of occupational noise. Workers in the mining sector, followed by those in construction and manufacturing, are most likely to suffer from hearing impairment. An estimated \$242 million is spent on workers' compensation

annually for hearing loss disability, according to the Department of Labor.

In an effort to reduce these numbers, the Labor Department launched a challenge earlier this summer called "Hear and Now," in which it is soliciting pitches for ideas and technology to better alert workers of hazardous noise levels.

But critics say that while these efforts might help, technology to reduce hearing injuries already exists. They contend that the maximum level of noise exposure allowed before employers are required to provide sound-protection equipment is too low, and the regulations developed by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration are outdated. For example, those regulations use sound level limits that don't factor in the noise exposures that occur beyond the workplace — at restaurants, concerts and sporting venues, for instance — that can add to workers' cumulative risks of harm.

According to OSHA officials, the agency will issue a request for information later this year about current regulations at construction sites to figure out if more stringent protections are needed and how companies are complying. (The construc-



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tion industry has often been held to separate noise-related rules and requirements than those in place for other industries.) The review may lead to an update to these rules, most of which date back to the 1970s.

Employers may also have to shoulder the responsibility of instilling more awareness and education among their workers. For example, workers sometimes choose not to wear hearing protection at work sites because they are not aware of their risks.

Mark Cullen, a professor at Stanford University who explores workplace hazards, found in a study that the employees who suffer most from hearing loss were those who were working in jobs involving moderate noise levels instead of high-noise environments.

"At very high noise exposures, people very faithfully wear hearing protection and at low noise situations, people don't," he said.

Cullen said employers could build noise barriers or eliminate noisy equipment, but old factories often choose to just offer hearing protection gear.

"But the problem with hearing protections is it is way too easy, unsupervised, to take it off," he said. "What would really make a difference is to train employers."

He said there is also existing technology that will measure noise exposure in real time in each worker's hearing protection gear, with lights that will flash when the level becomes hazardous. The data can be downloaded each day to monitor daily exposures.

Theresa Schulz, hearing conservation manager at Honeywell Safety Products, said many companies, including hers, already have such products. While she sees more large employers expressing interest in these technologies, the cost might be a deterrent for others.

"But when you think about it ... the cost of having these electronics to protect the workers is nothing compared to the damage after that," she said.

Meanwhile, the CDC, as part of its Buy Quiet campaign has an online database of power tools with information about sound levels of different tools to encourage businesses to invest in quieter tools and machinery.



22 million

Number of workers exposed annually to hazardous levels of occupational noise according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

\$242 million

Amount spent annually on workers' compensation for hearing loss disability according to the Department of Labor

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