

Introduction

By now you will be aware that the HSE has made some changes to the way that audiometry tests are reviewed.

Previously, only the category was reported, and this information was used to determine if an employee's hearing was good or bad.

The categorisation scheme was never really meant to be used for this purpose – it was designed for looking at patterns within those group and for triggering certain actions such as referrals. For example, an employee might achieve a Category 1 result but still have Noise Induced Hearing Loss (NIHL). A Category 3 result might be due to a medical problem or excess wax.

More recently, the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) has instructed Occupational Health (OH) Providers to routinely screen for NIHL in addition to reporting categories. This means that every result will now have two outcomes:

1. A result category

2. A NIHL status

The NIHL status affects the categorisation process meaning that regardless of audiometric calculations, a newly identified case of NIHL will result in a Cat 3 result and in 12 months' time, regardless of calculation, that loss will result in a Cat 2 outcome as long as the results remain stable.

This latent adjustment to categorisation is the reason that newly identified cases of NIHL will receive an initial "Category Deferred" outcome as it may well change following a physician review, which would be confusing.

Action where NIHL is suspected.

In most cases, an employee's NIHL status will be described in one of three outcomes:

1. **NIHL not detected.** This indicates that an audiometric test did not meet the threshold for NIHL using the Cole's Notch criteria.
2. **NIHL under Investigation.** This occurs when a practitioner identifies an audiometry curve which may conform to the criteria for NIHL. It will be passed to an OH Physician for review. This class of employee will not be categorised initially for the reasons previously given.
3. **NIHL Confirmed.** Previously diagnosed or determined recently by an OH physician, the employees result meets the "Coles Notch" criteria of NIHL. Both employer and employee will be informed of this outcome in writing following physician review.

Employee's results may also require review by an OH physician where there is a new Cat 3 or Cat 4 result or where there is a pattern of uncontrolled hearing loss regardless of Category. Sometimes, this review may be face-to-face.

Employees may still be referred to their own GP for certain issues, such as Unilateral Hearing Loss or where result accuracy has been affected by excess wax or infection.

Once an employee has been reviewed, they will not require additional consideration above the usual routine hearing tests unless further loss occurs.

Employer Actions based on Audiometry outcomes.

Category 1. No direct action required. Continue routine training and enforcement of local control policies inc. PPE care & use.

Category 2. As per above, plus ensure that PPE and other controls are suitable to the risk and that the employee understands when and how... (see next page)

to wear their PPE, how to maintain it and that they are compliant with local instructions about its use.

Category 3. As per above plus undertake an individual risk assessment to ensure controls are suitable. Consider a functional assessment to determine that an employee is safe to work in a noisy area if they have a significant hearing deficit.

Category 4. As above plus identify reasons for control failure. Consider redeployment to a quieter area if loss cannot be stabilised.

NIHL. Remember that an employee may suffer noise induced loss regardless of the category, although it will be more prevalent amongst Cat 3 and Cat 4 results (Follow guidance as per Cat).

General Advice. When reviewing the use of PPE ensure that affected employees are not over-attenuated. Cat 3 & 4 employees and those with hearing aids will probably require specialised advice regarding PPE selection.

Where significant hearing loss has occurred (Cat 3 or 4), a functional assessment is a good way to ensure that a worker is safe to work in a particular area and can hear warning bells and sirens etc. whilst wearing their PPE.

A copy of this & other documentation can be found from <https://mohs.co.uk/resources> or using the QR code below.



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Poor Hearing & Noise Induced Hearing Loss: A Guide for Employers



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