

LISTEN UP!

First Responders Are at Higher Risk for Hearing Loss

Blazing sirens, revving motors and loud gun shots – these sounds are more than the fabric of your basic crime drama. They are the reality on the job for law enforcement personnel and other first responders across the country and a primary reason for the elevated level of hearing loss among this employee group.

While most law enforcement agencies require the use of hearing protection on the range, unprotected exposure of officers to sirens and other high-intensity sounds still exists. Many law enforcement personnel also spend substantial time in their cars or on motorcycles, where road and engine noise increase their risk of hearing loss. Firefighters and EMTs are exposed to sirens and the loud sounds of emergency equipment on the scene of fires and accidents, and during practice scenarios, placing these professionals at higher risk as well.

SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

Hearing loss is an issue of epidemic proportions across professions. Most people are surprised to learn that **nearly one in five Americans suffer from hearing impairment** severe enough to make communication difficult.ⁱ Contrary to common belief, this problem is not contained to the older population. According to the Better Hearing Institute, the majority (65 percent) of people with hearing loss are younger than age 65 and still in the workforce.ⁱⁱ Younger workers are at risk as well. In fact, 7.4 percent of generation Xers (ages 29-40) already have hearing loss.ⁱⁱⁱ

Understanding that employees in the law enforcement field are at higher risk for hearing loss, EPIC Hearing Healthcare conducted a comprehensive national survey which uncovered the scope of the problem for this group specifically.^{iv} It found that 52 percent of law enforcement personnel have a diagnosed hearing problem (versus 12 percent of workers overall). An additional 28 percent of law enforcement personnel suspect they have hearing loss, but have not sought treatment.



FIREFIGHTERS AT RISK

Hearing loss among firefighters is well-documented by NIOSH. In one study, 38 percent had mild to moderate hearing loss and 14 percent had severe to profound.^v

Another NIOSH study found that the severity of firefighters' hearing loss increased with their years of service, reinforcing the need for early detection, protection and treatment.^{vi}



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IMPACT OF HEARING LOSS ON THE JOB

Whether face-to-face in the field, or over the telephone or radio, hearing is an important part of communication – keeping first responders informed, safe and connected. Strain from untreated hearing loss can lead to poor understanding and become a safety concern. It can also affect employee health and well-being by causing excessive anxiety and stress, even contributing to depression. According to EPIC’s survey, more than three-fourths of law enforcement personnel agree that moderate hearing loss would hurt their productivity on the job.

Despite the overall growing number of employees suffering from hearing loss, far too few are seeking the hearing health care they need. **Less than one-fifth of law enforcement personnel have had their hearing checked in the past two years.**

Of those with untreated hearing loss:

- 67% often ask people to repeat what they said
- 61% often misunderstand what is being said
- 61% sometimes pretend to hear when they cannot

Law enforcement personnel are particularly sensitive to employer perceptions of hearing loss, with 66 percent saying they would be concerned if their employer suspected or knew that they had hearing loss, versus only 44 percent of the general employee population.

PROTECT THOSE WHO PROTECT US

Employers appear to be in tune with trying to alleviate employee concerns about the stigma of hearing loss. In fact, “to demonstrate my support of employees seeking treatment for hearing loss” is the top response employers give when asked why they would offer hearing insurance to employees, according to EPIC’s research.

In addition to putting off hearing checkups due to concerns over stigma, many employees are simply poorly informed about the importance of regular hearing assessments and early intervention/treatment.

Show your support:

- **Educate** employees about risk factors and treatment options for hearing loss.
- **Demonstrate** your support for seeking hearing loss treatment by offering financial support, such as hearing insurance.

When presented with the facts, employers and employees alike agree there is little question about the importance of healthy hearing to promote health and well-being, and most view it as integral to their job performance as well. Employers can make a positive difference by providing the tools and encouragement to help employees get the care they need.

To find out more about hearing health care benefits, visit www.epichearing.com.



Did you know?

From **\$.35 to \$1.75 per member per month**, hearing insurance is one of the most affordable benefits available for its value.

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ⁱ One in five Americans has hearing loss. Johns Hopkins Medicine press release. Issued November 14, 2011. Retrieved January 2, 2014 from http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/media/releases/one_in_five_americans_has_hearing_loss.

ⁱⁱ Kochkin, S. Prevalence of Hearing Loss in the U.S. Better Hearing Institute. Retrieved January 2, 2014 from http://www.betterhearing.org/hearing_loss/prevalence_of_hearing_loss/index.cfm.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kochkin, S. Prevalence of Hearing Loss in the U.S. Better Hearing Institute. Retrieved January 2, 2014 from http://www.betterhearing.org/hearing_loss/prevalence_of_hearing_loss/index.cfm.

^{iv} Listen Hear! 2013 Employee and Employer Perceptions of Hearing Loss and Hearing Loss Benefits survey. Employee survey conducted online by Wakefield Research on behalf of EPIC Hearing Healthcare between November 22 and December 13, 2013, among 1,500 nationally representative full-time employed Americans 18+, including oversamples of sub-audiences of up to 101 Hispanics, 110 African-Americans, 100 Asian-Americans, 169 teachers and 100 law enforcement professionals (all employed full-time). Employer survey conducted online by Source Media on behalf of EPIC Hearing Healthcare in December 2013 among 493 benefits professionals.

^v Promoting Hearing Health among Firefighters. DHHS (NIOSH) Publication No. 2013-142, May 2013. [<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/wp-solutions/2013-142/pdfs/2013-142.pdf>]

^{vi} NIOSH [1990]. Health Hazard Evaluation report: Memphis Fire Department—Memphis, Tennessee. By Tubbs RL. NIOSH HETA No. 86–138–2017, [<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/hhe/reports/pdfs/1986-0138-2017.pdf>]