Can You Hear Me Now?

By Tim Wade,
Chairman, IATSE Safety Committee

Since the start of manned space exploration, science has given us many useful new tools that we use in our daily lives. Items such as Velcro and different types of batteries are an example of inventions that were developed for use in the space program. We have been able to take some of these new inventions and incorporate them into our daily lives, both at work and at home.

Throughout our daily routines, we often give little thought to the sounds and noises we are exposed to during the day, not only at work but at home and play. How many times have you gone to a concert or a show at a theater or an arena only to have your ears ringing when the show is over? When you are at work, are you around equipment or machinery that causes the same effect? As we age, there are problems that science allows us to correct that have been created due to the aging process. We can help our eyesight with glasses, we can take medications to reduce our cholesterol, we can even help ourselves by eating correctly. There is one thing that science can not help us with and that is the loss of our hearing. Hearing is a sense that is critical to us in many ways and yet it is one of the senses that we can not regain.

The sounds that we hear are measured in decibels. These are the standards that are used by both Federal and State OSHAs in determining the safe levels that we are exposed to in the workplace. Federal OSHA Standard 1910.95(c)(2) states that "For purposes of paragraphs (c) through (n) of this section, an 8-hour time-weighted average of 85 decibels or a dose of fifty percent shall also be referred to as the action level." These are the levels that we can safely be exposed to in the workplace based on average of eight hours of 85 decibels during our shift. In other words, any prolonged exposure to sound above that limit could cause hearing loss. Additionally, this means that your employer must provide hearing protection for you.

How can you tell if the noise levels that you are experiencing at work are too loud?

- Do you or your co-workers have to raise your voices to be heard?
- Do you have ringing in your ears after you finish your shift?
- On your way home from work, do you have to turn up the volume of the radio higher than when you went to work?
- Do you have problems hearing conversations when there are background noises present?
- Do you have trouble hearing conversations at restaurants or at parties?

If you have answered yes to any of these questions, you may have a noise problem in your workplace. If this is the case, a noise assessment should be undertaken at the job site to determine the cause and remediate the problem. The following list will give you an idea of the levels of sounds that are created around us both at work and home:

- Normal conversation 60 dBA.
- Whispered conversation 20 dBA.
- Normal television 74 dBA.
- Lawn mowers 95 dBA.
- Electric drills 95 dBA.
- Air operated tools 120 dBA.

So far we have talked about the workplace but what about in our normal daily environment? With the advent of the popular Apple "ipod" and other MP3 players, there is concern from health officials as to the possible loss of hearing created by these types of machines. These types of players usually come with "ear buds". These accessories allow us to listen to the music that we place on them. How can we protect ourselves from volume levels that could expose us to potential hearing loss? One way is to listen to those devices with the volume turned to a low setting. Apple has added a program that is downloadable from its web site (http://www.apple.com/) that allows the user to set levels on these devices as an additional method of controlling the levels produced by those players. By taking that type of active approach, we are able to make it safer for us and our children while listening to these devices.

The idea of these Safety Articles is to make you aware of your surroundings both at work and at home. The key word is aware. The more aware you are of your surroundings and the conditions of the environment that you are in, the better prepared you will be to lead your life safely.