



## **Hazard alert**

### What you should know about using earbuds on the job

Since earbuds have become commonplace, Oregon OSHA has conducted multiple workplace fatality investigations where earbuds may have played a role.

During one investigation at a construction site, earbuds were identified as a contributing factor in the fatality. A worker appeared to have lost awareness of his surroundings while listening to music in his earbuds. Unaware that a slow-moving excavator was approaching from behind, he stepped into its path and was struck and run over.



#### **Q | What are the risks associated with using earbuds on the job?**

All earbuds, regardless of the type, have risks when they are used on the job. Those risks include:

- Difficulty hearing moving equipment, alarms, warnings, horns, shouts, or instructions that could result in being struck by, or caught in, machinery
- The onset or worsening of hearing loss through excessive earbud volume. Even music played through earbuds can contribute to overall noise exposure at work. If the permissible exposure level (PEL) for noise is exceeded, then the employee exposure must be reduced to at or below the PEL, by reducing or removing noise and using hearing protection. The current Oregon OSHA PEL is 90 dBA as an 8-hour time-weighted average (TWA).
- Interference with hearing protectors with a labeled Noise Reduction Rating (NRR)
- Difficulty communicating clearly with co-workers
- Inserted earbud material can become contaminated with workplace chemicals, leading to increased exposures or irritation to the ear canal; likewise, silicone earbuds may be irritants

**Q | Are noise-canceling earbuds as effective as traditional hearing protectors, such as EPA-labeled earplugs and earmuffs with an assigned NRR?**

No. Traditional hearing protectors, such as earplugs and earmuffs, must be tested and approved in accordance with American National Standards Institute (ANSI) guidelines and must be labeled with an NRR established by the EPA.

Some active noise-canceling earbuds do have an NRR (generally about 25 dBA) but they do not protect against extremely loud impulse sound waves, such as gunfire, fireworks, or jackhammers, or against loud sustained noise (greater than 90 dBA, for example).

**Q | What can you do to reduce risks associated with using earbuds on the job?**

1. Do a thorough evaluation of your entire workplace. Identify jobs, work processes, and equipment to determine where the use of earbuds should

be prohibited along with areas where their use will not create a hazard to the user or others in the area. Not sure how to evaluate hazards in your workplace? Oregon OSHA offers free and confidential consultation services.

2. Inform employees about the hazards of using earbuds on the job.
3. Adopt a policy that prohibits the use of earbuds in areas where they present a risk to employee health or safety.
4. Enforce the policy. Document any violations and follow up with appropriate discipline, if necessary.



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## Workers

Your employer cannot retaliate against you for reporting a workplace health or safety concern or violation. For more information about your rights, visit the Oregon OSHA website.



*Hazard alerts provide information on hazardous materials, equipment, or practices. For more information, contact the Oregon OSHA Standards and Technical Resources Section at 503-378-3272 or 800-922-2689 (toll-free), or visit our website at [osha.oregon.gov](https://osha.oregon.gov).*