

April 26, 2005

Question:

I have an account who conducted their baseline hearing tests in 2003. They conducted follow-up tests in 2004 and again last month. Some results improved over the last two years and some showed decline. There were two employees that show a "negative" STS of 10db from the baseline 2003 test. He is unclear as to what all he needs to do now, other than notify the employee, retrain them in hearing protection and maybe have them re-tested again in 30 days.

This exact same question came up for me when I was in the field managing my safety and health program, and I never did feel like I had a satisfactory answer. Is a medical examination required? I thought it was, but just to document the loss and to determine etiology - is that right? Who pays for the exam? Is the employer supposed to pay, or can this be done under health insurance? I did not look today, but last time I looked, the rule was not clear. It goes on the OR OSHA 300 if there is a 10 db average shift, right? What are the criteria for that?

Answer:

For your first several questions, I found some letters of interpretation from Federal OSHA that address those issues:

"According to the standard, should all employees whose audiogram depicts a standard threshold shift (STS) be referred to an Audiologist, Otolaryngologist, or Physician for further evaluation?"

All employees whose audiogram depicts an STS do not have to be referred to the licensed or certified audiologist, otolaryngologist, or other physician for evaluation. The technician decides which employees to refer to the professional based on guidelines established by the professional."

http://www.osha.gov/pls/oshaweb/owadisp.show_document?p_table=INTERPRETATIONS&p_id=21481

"When is the company responsible for paying for the referral to a physician? The employer is responsible for paying for referrals that are needed to accurately determine an employee's hearing status, or if it is suspected that the provided earplugs are causing or aggravating an irritation or infection of the employee's ear canals.

Is a company responsible for any and all problems that an employee has with his ears or hearing if he is included in a hearing conservation program? The company must pay for any referrals that are for the purpose of further identifying the effects of occupational

noise exposure or any detrimental effects from wearing hearing protectors. Medical pathologies which are clearly not related to the wearing of hearing protectors or an otoscopically abnormal eardrum due to an allergy or cold are not the employer's responsibility. However, the employee must be informed of the need for examination or treatment."

http://www.osha.gov/pls/oshaweb/owadisp.show_document?p_table=INTERPRETATION&p_id=22593

So basically, if there is a shift, the person performing the audiogram follows their professional standards of when that audiogram is reviewed by an audiologist, otolaryngologist, or physician. Further medical evaluations are determined at that level.

As for who pays, the standard doesn't specifically say, and the interpretations have been curiously silent about that issue. There is no specific prohibition about using an employees' insurance unless it is a work-related condition, in which case an 801 would be appropriate.

For a shift to be recordable, there has to be both a 10 dB shift from the baseline AND the hearing level in that same ear is at 25 dB or more above "audiometric zero."

"Audiometric zero" is defined as the lowest sound pressure level that the average young adult with normal hearing can hear.

Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance.

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