

Health and safety concerns with headphones

The main concerns are

- Hearing fire and other emergency alarms
- Excessive noise
- Cleanliness and hygiene with use.

The following are general guidelines on the use of headphones provided by the University.

Where are headphones used?

Headphones are used in several areas such as help desks, language labs, libraries. It is recommended that where a job/task involves computer and telephone work for 3 or more hours a day, then consideration is given to the use of Headsets.

The advantages of using a headset is that you work with your head and spine in the correct position for long-term comfort which reduces the risk of RSI, WRULDS (repetitive strain injuries or work related upper limb disorders) or , lower back pain, neck pain and tension headaches.

Types of headphones

Single speaker (Monaural) headband style – for people who spend time on the phone, but who also need to communicate with colleagues.

Two speaker (binaural) headband style – for people who require total concentration, working in noisy busy environments.

Over the ear (no headband) style – for people looking for an ultra light weight unobtrusive set.

Fire safety

Fire risk assessments dictate that there should be a means of alerting headphone users to the fire and emergency alarm which otherwise may be inaudible to them. There are currently 3 systems operating in the University.

- 1) A visual alarm in the user's field of view. However such alarms are not always suitable for certain health conditions and disabilities.
- 2) An extension to the Deaf alerter system. Deaf alerter is a radio-based fire alarm warning and public address messaging system for Deaf and hard of hearing people and involves an "alerter" operating within the building and can warn headphone users of alarm situations.
- 3) Automatic screen shut down system, although these systems are still in their infancy.

For advice on any of these systems, please contact the Fire Safety Adviser on extension 8282.

Noise

Generally where staff are subjected to noise levels, the Noise at Work regulations apply above certain action levels, these being 85 and 90dB(A). These will also be subject to change in the next 18 months with new noise legislation being introduced. It is relatively easy to measure noise exposure from work equipment, machinery or loudspeakers. It is more complicated from headphones. In order to help areas with noise issues and risk assessment, the following should be followed.

- 1) It is recommended that if the use of headphones are required in a work related task, then an audiometry test should be carried out to determine existing problems with hearing at the pre-employment stage. If anyone feels that they are experiencing problems with their hearing, please contact their line manager or Area Safety Co-ordinator so that they can be referred to Occupational Health.
- 2) Staff should keep their own personal headset in a safe and secure place.
- 3) All Users should be encouraged to read instructions on correct use and positioning.
- 4) All Users should be encouraged to make full use of the volume control and to remember to turn the volume control after use.
- 5) Headsets may be fitted with noise limiters to prevent acoustic shock. The limiters stop loud noise reaching the earpiece, even if they malfunction. However anyone experiencing uncomfortably loud noise should report this immediately.

Hygiene

Ear cushions, voice tubes and the headset itself should be cleaned on a regular basis using proprietary wipes, for example weekly. The voice tube and ear cushion should be replaced every 6-8 months.

For other noise related queries or further guidance these issues, please contact Health and Safety Services.

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