



Hearing Loss Prevention Versus Hearing Conservation: What's In A Name?

The goal of CFR 29 1910.95 (the occupational noise standard) is to *prevent* occupationally induced hearing loss. Of course, our hope is that all prevention training becomes second nature off the job as well.

It is a fact that noise induced hearing loss is *100% preventable* by implementing appropriately attenuating hearing protection, engineering controls, and administrative controls. In 1998, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) published a position paper entitled Criteria for a Recommended Standard-Occupational Noise Exposure. While OSHA has yet to adopt NIOSH's recommendations, the paper contained a monumental phrase which seems to have gone unnoticed by many-*hearing loss prevention*.

It is unusual to read OSHA literature (i.e. interpretive memos, etc.) and see the word "*prevention*" used; the prevailing term of choice is "*conservation*". An organization, whose stated mission is "to *prevent* hearing loss due to noise and other environmental factors in all sectors of society", calls itself the National Hearing *Conservation* Association (NHCA). CAOHC (Council on the Accreditation of Occupational Hearing *Conservationists*) states the mission: "to promote the *conservation* of hearing by enhancing the quality of occupational hearing *conservation* programs".

Arguably, use of the term *Hearing Conservation* is appropriate for some workers, but certainly not for all. It is true that many workers enter industry with pre-existing noise-induced hearing loss and so use of the term conservation may be appropriate since the goal in such cases is to conserve/preserve residual hearing. Many workers, however, enter the workplace with normal hearing. Since noise-induced hearing loss is 100% preventable, the goal in such cases is to *prevent* noise-induced hearing loss.

So what's in a name? Use of the term "hearing loss prevention" most effectively conveys the message that noise-induced hearing loss is completely preventable. Unlike "conservation", the word "prevention" is appropriate both for those employees entering the workplace with "virgin" ears and for those employees entering the workplace with pre-existing noise induced loss. Research is underway to determine if noise-induced hearing loss progresses after (noise) exposure cessation. However, "new" or "fresh" noise-induced cochlear damage is preventable by implementing appropriately attenuating hearing protection, engineering controls, and administrative controls.

Regardless of your term of choice, the terms "prevention" and "conservation" relate only to the prevention of noise-induced hearing loss. Non-noise induced hearing loss (e.g. loss due to pathology or aging) is not always preventable, with the exception of airborne, ingested, or topical ototoxic exposures.



Successful hearing loss *prevention* is part procedure, and part a state of mind. To produce the maximum effect of your training message, use the term hearing loss *prevention*. It is powerful.

Authored by: Robert Williams, Au.D. | Director Audiology | T K Group, Inc.