

HEALTH AWARENESS: MAINTAINING YOUR VISION & HEARING



Forestry workers rely on vision and hearing to interact with a constantly changing environment. Whether walking through the block, falling a tree, running a loader or driving a truck, forestry workers depend on their ability to read patterns of light that signal the location of objects and their rate of movement. Sounds also give warnings of approaching danger, and hearing is our main way to communicate with co-workers. As we age, normal losses in hearing and vision can make it more difficult to work safely and well.

Facts:

- Age related vision and hearing loss can begin around the age of 40 years and are common by the age of 65 years. Beyond the age of 75 years vision and hearing loss can significantly impact quality of life.
- The risk of occupational injury with age related vision and hearing loss is significantly increased.
- Age related vision and hearing loss have both genetic and environmental causes. Smoking, diabetes and high blood pressure or hardening of the arteries significantly increase the deterioration in hearing and vision with aging. Sun exposure can increase the risk of developing cataracts (clouding of the lens in the eye).
- Early detection is critical for preventing the progression of hearing and vision loss. Because the forestry industry is one of the highest for work related hearing loss, most forestry workers have annual hearing tests. However, few people have their vision checked regularly. Adults over the age of 40 should have their eyes checked by a specialist (optometrist or ophthalmologist) every two years.

What to expect:

- Age related changes in hearing and vision are usually gradual, which makes them more difficult to detect. As a supervisor or co-worker you have the opportunity to observe these changes and can help intervene.
- Loss of hearing in the higher frequencies is more frequent with age related loss than hearing problems associated with noise exposure. Hearing loss due to aging can also result in difficulties in separating out sounds (like understanding what people are saying) in noisy environments.
- Around the age of 40 – 50 years it becomes harder to focus on objects that are close, especially in low light. This can be corrected by wearing glasses.
- Floaters are gray or black areas that are visible on a white background and move across your vision when you blink. A few of them are normal with aging but flashes of light or sudden increases in the number and size of gray or black spots can signal something more serious that requires immediate medical attention.

- Most people over the age of 40 - 50 have small cloudy patches in their vision that they may not even notice. Larger areas either in the center or off to the sides may signal a more serious condition. Because these changes are so hard to detect it is important to make sure that older workers have their eyes examined regularly.
- Most people's eyes become more sensitive as they age. They may get dry and become sensitive to glare, making night driving harder. It may also get harder to focus when the light is dim.

What you can do:

- Make sure to have annual hearing tests and a complete eye exam every two years.
- Wear your PPE, hearing and vision protection can prevent damage that will speed up age related loss.
- If you need glasses or hearing aids to correct your vision or hearing wear them. It doesn't mean you are old, it means you are smart.
- If you smoke or chew tobacco, stop now. There are lots of good programs available to help.
- If you are overweight get your sugars checked. Uncontrolled diabetes will permanently harm many critical body systems including your eyes.
- Sometimes neck pain can restrict head movement and result in less vision to the sides. If you can't move your head from side to side easily, see a physiotherapist and work on increasing your range of motion.
- Dry eyes can be treated with drops, but make sure to check with your doctor to make sure that the ones that you are using are the right ones for your problem. If you do use drops, be careful to keep the container clean, if contaminated they can result in an eye infection.
- If you suffer from vision or hearing loss, some of the effects can be reduced by being careful to focus on the task at hand. Your brain can adjust for some of the loss. This may require special practice, ask your doctor if it can help you.

What Employers and Supervisors can do:

- Ensure your team is wearing their hearing and vision protection. Replace worn out or damaged personal protective equipment.
- Encourage workers to have a complete eye exam every two years. Find out what kind of support your company provides for reimbursing workers for an eye exam and share the information with your group.
- Squinting is often a sign of poor vision. If you notice someone squinting find out when they last had their eyes checked.
- Make sure to that all of the workers under your supervision have annual hearing tests if they are exposed to noise that exceeds the noise exposure limits. See below for a good resource that explains those limits. Keep a record of when people have been tested.

- If you know of anyone on your crew who need glasses or hearing aids to correct their vision or hearing check that they are wearing them. Tell them it doesn't mean that they are old; it means they are smart.
- If anyone on your crew smokes or chews tobacco, run a Stop-Now campaign. There are lots of good programs available to help. Get families, friends and coworkers involved. Their support will greatly increase the chances of success.
- Uncontrolled diabetes will permanently harm many critical body systems including the eyes. Contact your local public health nurse, they may be able to run a diabetes awareness event for you.
- If you notice workers who can't move their heads easily from side to side, encourage them to see a physiotherapist to work on increasing range of motion. Try holding a morning neck stretch session as part of your regular tailgate or safety briefing.