

Fact sheet



Effect of hearing loss on driving heavy vehicles

Mild to moderate hearing loss may not affect a person's ability to drive safely. People who have a hearing loss often compensate by being more cautious and more attentive to visual cues. Those with hearing aids should wear them when driving.

Responsiveness to critical events is an important safety consideration for drivers of commercial vehicles. Drivers require a sufficient level of hearing to be aware of changes in engine or road noises that may signal developing problems, horns, rail crossings alerts, emergency signals and sirens.

Hearing loss can affect anyone

One in six Australians have some form of hearing impairment, ranging from Deafness to a partial loss. The causes may be hereditary, illness, exposure to excessive noise and the affects of ageing. It is often a gradual process.

Medical standards for licensing

Drivers of commercial vehicles are required to meet a hearing threshold, which is assessed by a hearing health professional.

In addition to appropriately fitted hearing aids, various engineering solutions are available to help compensate for the risk to safety that may arise from a hearing disability. These include:

- mirrors that enhance the rear view
- visual warning devices and vehicle monitoring displays

Standards

A person is not allowed to hold an unconditional commercial licence if they have unaided hearing loss greater than or equal to 40db in the better ear.

A conditional licence may be considered by the driver licensing authority subject to ongoing review, taking into account the nature of the driving task and information provided by an audiologist as to whether the standard is met with a hearing aid.

The driver licensing authority will take into consideration the nature of the driving task as well as the medical condition, particularly when granting a conditional licence. Take the examples of a farmer who drives a heavy vehicle on an occasional basis, compared to an interstate multiple combination vehicle driver.

What can you do to protect your hearing?

Hearing loss cannot be reversed. Every step you take today to protect your hearing is important.

Today's drivers of heavy vehicles work in a more healthy environment than their predecessors. Modern truck designs dampen the sound of engine and road noise.

Prolonged exposure at higher noise levels can cause damage to hearing.

Wearing headphones played at excessive levels is of great concern to hearing health professionals, not to mention the distraction to good driving.

The first step towards protecting your hearing is to recognise the value of good hearing and to ignore any stigma you think might attach to hearing loss. The next step is to consult your organisation's OHS representative or human resources officer. They may not be aware of the issue. You could encourage them to invite a professional audiologist to test sound levels in your work environment and offer hearing tests sponsored by your organisation. Alternatively, visit a local qualified audiologist and ask for a checkup.

Frequently asked questions

Audiograms

An audiogram is used to display the results of a hearing test. The softest sounds you can hear are your hearing thresholds and these are marked on an audiogram. Hearing tests can tell you the type and degree of hearing loss you may have.

Will a hearing aid restore my hearing back to normal?

Hearing devices benefit many people. However, no hearing device can restore your hearing to normal. The benefits depend on the degree of your hearing loss.

Will I become dependent on a hearing aid?

Do not be concerned about becoming dependent. A hearing device will help you communicate better and enjoy life more. Many people wonder how they ever managed without it.

Does it take long to get used to a hearing aid?

This will vary from person to person because every person is different. It takes some time to adjust to listening, and to hearing everything louder. Hearing devices amplify sounds. Following a conversation in a noisy place can be very difficult. With practice, listening can become an enjoyable experience again.

Further information

Assessing Fitness to Drive for commercial and private vehicle drivers: medical standards for licensing and clinical management guidelines. Austroads and NTC. March 2012

Information on hearing loss and ways to address it:

http://www.deafnessforum.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=218&Itemid=271

Deafness Forum of Australia is the peak not for profit body representing the one in six Australians who are Deaf, Deafblind, Hearing Impaired or have a chronic ear disorder. www.deafnessforum.org.au

