

Occupational hearing loss

As part of our policy project plan, we're reviewing Policy 03-01, Part II, Application 5 (Hearing Loss) to ensure it provides appropriate guidance for adjudicating hearing loss claims.

Current policy

Our preliminary review identified opportunities to make our policy more transparent and easier to understand and apply.

What we propose

We are not proposing an expansion or reduction of coverage. For transparency, we're incorporating current practices directly into policy. We propose the following policy enhancements:

Current policy		Proposed policy enhancements
Silent on process for determining entitlement for hearing loss	→	Includes a high-level process for determining entitlement for hearing loss
Silent on how we determine if there is noise-induced hearing loss	→	For noise-induced hearing loss, we refer to the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM) Guidance
Silent on statutory presumption for noise-induced hearing loss	→	Outlines how and when the statutory presumption for noise-induced hearing loss is applied
Silent on chemically-induced hearing loss	→	Outlines when chemically-induced hearing loss may be compensable
Silent on age-related hearing loss	→	Clearly states that hearing loss related solely to aging is not compensable because it is not work related
Silent on tinnitus	→	Outlines specific criteria when compensation for tinnitus may be available
Silent on replacement of hearing aids	→	Clearly states that we do not pay to replace lost or stolen hearing aids

Process

The process for determining entitlement for hearing loss is:

- 1) Determine if the worker has noise-induced, traumatic, or chemically-induced hearing loss
- 2) Determine whether the hearing loss is caused by the worker's employment

See draft policy for specific details on how we make these determinations.

Occupational noise-induced hearing loss

Occupational noise-induced hearing loss is the gradual loss of hearing due to prolonged occupational exposure to excessive noise levels in the workplace.

A statutory presumption applies to occupational noise-induced hearing loss. Under this presumption, noise-induced hearing loss is presumed to be caused by employment when it meets the following three requirements:

- 1) There is a confirmed [diagnosis](#) of noise-induced hearing loss, AND
- 2) There is [objective evidence of disablement](#) in the form of hearing loss, AND
- 3) At some time during the [12 months preceding](#) the disablement, the worker was employed in an industry or process where there was [prolonged](#) occupational exposure to [excessive](#) noise levels.

Exposure levels

For noise-induced hearing loss:

- Noise level is [excessive](#) if exposure is higher than the occupational exposure limit set out in Alberta's *Occupational Health and Safety Code* (currently 85 dBA averaged over an eight-hour workday).
- [Prolonged](#) occupational exposure means the worker has a clear history of exposure to excessive noise levels in the workplace for a minimum cumulative duration of two years. The exposure must be in Alberta or while the worker was entitled to WCB-Alberta coverage.

We want to hear from you

Please see the following draft policy attached at the end of this document for additional details.

- Draft Policy 03-01, Part II, Application 5

For readability, the attached draft does not use track changes. For transparency, blue text in the left margin of the draft policy links readers to existing sources for comparison purposes.

We welcome your feedback, ideas, and suggestions

This posting will be open for consultation until October 7, 2024.

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APPLICATION 5: HEARING LOSS

1. *What types of hearing loss may be compensable?*

Hearing loss may be compensable when it arises out of and occurs in the course of employment (see Policy 02-01). Occupational hearing loss may be traumatic, noise-induced, chemically-induced, or a combination of these.

Occupational traumatic hearing loss

Occupational traumatic hearing loss is sudden or acute and traceable to a specific compensable injury (e.g., a basal skull fracture, exposure to excessive sound pressure levels, etc.).

Occupational noise-induced hearing loss

Occupational noise-induced hearing loss is the gradual loss of hearing due to prolonged occupational exposure to excessive noise levels in the workplace.

Occupational chemically-induced hearing loss (ototoxicity)

Occupational chemically-induced hearing loss is hearing loss as a result of:

- exposure to certain toxins or chemicals (ototoxicity) within the workplace, or
- medications prescribed for a compensable condition

[Policy 03-01, Part II, Application 5, Question 1](#)

For age-related hearing loss (which is not compensable), see Question 9.

2. *What is the process for determining entitlement for hearing loss?*

The process for determining entitlement for hearing loss is as follows:

- 1) Determine if the worker has noise-induced hearing loss, traumatic hearing loss, or chemically-induced hearing loss (see Question 3).
- 2) Determine whether the hearing loss was caused by the worker's employment:

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APPLICATION 5: HEARING LOSS

Entitlement for hearing loss (continued)

- a) For noise-induced hearing loss, see Questions 4-7
- b) For traumatic and chemically-induced hearing loss, see Question 8

Determining the type of hearing loss

3. *How does WCB determine what type of hearing loss the worker has?*

[Hearing Loss Health Care
Provider Fact Sheet](#)

Hearing loss is diagnosed by an audiologist or medical specialist (with specific training in audiometry/hearing loss) using objective findings on an audiogram(s).

To determine if the hearing loss is noise-induced, WCB refers to the current American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM) Guidance Statement to help determine whether the pattern on the audiogram is consistent with noise-induced hearing loss. When depicted on an audiogram, noise-induced hearing loss typically has a characteristic pattern with a notch.

If it is not clear whether the hearing loss is noise-induced because the distinctive notch is not clear on the audiogram, WCB reviews medical evidence, using the “but for” standard of causation (see Policy 02-01, Part II, Application 7), to confirm whether the weight of medical evidence supports that any of the hearing loss was caused from prolonged exposure to excessive noise levels.

Traumatic and chemically-induced hearing loss may not have the characteristic notch seen with noise-induced hearing loss.

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Noise-induced hearing loss

4. *How does WCB determine whether noise-induced hearing loss was caused by employment?*

A statutory presumption applies to occupational noise-induced hearing loss. If the requirements of the statutory presumption are met, it is presumed that the hearing loss was caused by employment, unless the contrary is proven. See Questions 5 and 6.

If the requirements of the statutory presumption are not met, WCB adjudicates the claim based on its own merits. See Question 7.

5. *How does WCB determine if noise-induced hearing loss was caused by employment based on the statutory presumption?*

[Workers' Compensation Act, section 24](#)

[Workers' Compensation Regulation, Schedule B](#)

Under s.24 of the *WCA*, and Schedule B of the *WC Regulation*, there are three requirements that must be met to fall under the presumption that noise-induced hearing loss was caused by employment:

1. there is a confirmed **diagnosis of noise-induced hearing loss** (see Question 3),

AND

2. there is **objective evidence** that the worker experienced **disablement** (see Policy 01-05, Part I) in the form of hearing loss (for example, the worker sought treatment),

AND

3. at some time during the **12 months preceding the disablement**, the worker was employed in an industry or process where there was **prolonged** occupational exposure to **excessive** noise levels (see Question 6)

If these three requirements are met, the noise-induced hearing loss is presumed to be caused by employment, unless the presumption is rebutted. To rebut the

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APPLICATION 5: HEARING LOSS

Statutory presumption (continued)

presumption, evidence must show that the worker's hearing loss was, in fact, caused solely by a non-work exposure.

If these requirements are not met, WCB adjudicates the case on its own merit (see Question 7).

6. *How does WCB determine if there was prolonged occupational exposure to excessive noise levels?*

[Policy 03-01, Part II, Application 5, Question 3](#)

WCB determines there was prolonged occupational exposure to excessive noise levels if:

- a) The worker was exposed to **excessive noise levels** in the workplace

The noise level is excessive if exposure is higher than the occupational exposure limit (or equivalent) set out in Alberta's current *Occupational Health and Safety Code*.

AND

- b) The exposure to excessive noise was **prolonged**

Prolonged exposure means the worker has a clear history of exposure to excessive noise levels in the workplace for a minimum cumulative duration of two years. A minimum of two years of cumulative exposure must have occurred within Alberta or while the worker was entitled to WCB-Alberta coverage while working in a place other than Alberta.

7. *How does WCB determine if noise-induced hearing loss was caused by employment if the requirements of the statutory presumption are not met?*

For noise-induced hearing loss claims to be compensable,

- there must be a diagnosis of occupational noise-induced hearing loss (see Questions 3), and
- the hearing loss must arise out of and occur in the course of employment (see Policy 02-01 and below).

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APPLICATION 5: HEARING LOSS

Determining entitlement when statutory presumption not met (continued)

[Policy 02-01, Part II,
Application 7](#)

The “but for” test is used to determine if the noise-induced hearing loss was caused by employment (see Policy 02-01, Part II, Application 7).

In some cases, there may be several causes that meet the “but for” test and work in combination to cause hearing loss. Employment does not have to be the only factor, or even the primary one, for noise-induced hearing loss to be compensable. It must, however, be a necessary factor; if the noise-induced hearing loss would have happened anyway, regardless of the employment factor, it is not compensable.

If the weight of medical evidence supports that all of the hearing loss was caused by something other than prolonged exposure to excessive noise levels in the workplace, it is not occupational noise-induced hearing loss.

Traumatic and chemically-induced hearing loss

8. How does WCB determine whether traumatic or chemically-induced hearing loss was caused by employment?

For traumatic and chemically-induced hearing loss claims to be compensable,

- there must be a diagnosis of traumatic or chemically-induced hearing loss (see Question 3), and
- the hearing loss must arise out of and occur in the course of employment (see Policy 02-01).

For traumatic and chemically-induced hearing loss claims, WCB uses the “but for” test to determine causation (see Policy 02-01, Part II, Application 7).

In some cases, there may be several causes that meet the “but for” test and work in combination to cause hearing

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APPLICATION 5: HEARING LOSS

Determining whether traumatic or chemically-induced hearing loss was caused by employment (continued)

loss. Employment does not have to be the only factor, or even the primary one, for traumatic and chemically-induced hearing loss to be compensable. It must, however, be a necessary factor; if the hearing loss would have happened anyway, regardless of the employment factor, it is not compensable.

Age-related hearing loss

9. *Is age-related hearing loss (presbycusis) compensable?*

Hearing loss related **solely** to aging (presbycusis) is not compensable. An audiologist or medical specialist (with specific training in audiometry/hearing loss) establishes whether the worker's hearing loss is solely related to aging using an audiogram(s).

Hearing loss from presbycusis can be differentiated from noise-induced hearing loss because the effects from noise exposure do not worsen after prolonged exposure ends, whereas the rate of age-related hearing loss accelerates over time.

Tinnitus

10. *Is compensation available for tinnitus?*

Tinnitus on its own is not compensable. For tinnitus to be compensable, all of the following conditions must be met:

[Hearing Loss Worker Fact Sheet](#)

- There is a compensable claim for hearing loss (traumatic, noise-induced, or chemically-induced) in at least one ear, and
- The worker has used a WCB-provided hearing aid for a minimum of one year, and
- There is a clear and adequate history of two or more years of continuous tinnitus, and

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Tinnitus (continued)

- The tinnitus is confirmed by an audiologist or medical specialist (with specific training in audiometry/hearing loss), and
- The worker was diagnosed with tinnitus within the last five years of work exposure

Claims for tinnitus due to occupational factors other than noise-induced hearing loss will be considered on their individual merits.

Permanent impairment

11. *When is a worker entitled to a permanent disability award for hearing loss?*

[Policy 03-01, Part II, Application 5, Question 2](#)

[Policy 03-01, Part II, Application 5, Question 4](#)

A compensable hearing loss (traumatic, chemically-induced, or noise-induced) is considered a permanent disability when there is impairment of daily function, and only when specialized testing verifies a summative loss at each of the four speech frequencies (500 Hz, 1000 Hz, 2000 Hz, 3000 Hz in the American National Standards Institute - ANSI -audiometer standards) of at least 140 decibels in one ear. For WCB's approved rating schedule, see Appendix D, Alberta Permanent Clinical Impairment Guide.

If hearing aids fully restore a worker's ability to hear speech, it is possible the worker may not have a measurable permanent clinical impairment (See Policy 04-04) and may not be entitled to a permanent disability award.

When a worker with a pre-existing non-compensable hearing loss experiences a degree of compensable hearing loss, WCB determines the value of any permanent disability award based on the part of the overall disability attributable to industrial exposure in Alberta or while the worker was entitled to coverage under WCB-Alberta.

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Hearing aids

12. *When does WCB provide hearing aids?*

[Policy 03-01, Part II,](#)
[Application 5, Question 5](#)

When an audiologist or medical specialist (with specific training in audiometry/hearing loss) confirms the need for a hearing aid as a means of alleviating, lessening, or eliminating the effects of a compensable hearing loss, WCB may provide the appropriate appliance.

WCB does not pay to replace lost or stolen hearing aids.

Cost relief

13. *How is cost relief applied to hearing loss claims?*

[Policy 03-01, Part II,](#)
[Application 5, Question 6](#)

For the appropriate application of cost relief, see Policy 05-02, *Cost Relief*.

Effective date

14. *When is this policy application effective?*

This policy application (Application 5 – Hearing Loss) is effective Month Date, Year, and applies to all new hearing loss claims on or after that date, regardless of date of accident except when noted otherwise in a specific policy section(s).

Previous versions

- [Policy 0301 Part II - August 2015](#)
- [Policy 0301 Part II - January 2004](#)
- [Policy 0301 Part II - June 2002](#)
- [Policy 0301 Part II - June 2001](#)
- [Policy 0301 Part II - December 2000](#)
- [Policy 0301 Part II - March 1999](#)
- [Policy 0301 Part II \(consolidated manual 1st Issue\) - February 1997](#)

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