



Headset Safety Resource Kit

*A Resource Guide for Call Centre Employees
and
Health and Safety Delegates*

Headset Safety Resource Kit

A Resource Guide for Call Centre Employees and Health and Safety Delegates

Contents

1. What is Acoustic Shock?
2. Symptoms of Acoustic Shock
3. Dealing with an Acoustic Shock Incident
4. Identifying Risk Factors in your Workplace
5. Strategies to Minimise Acoustic Injuries
6. Managing Noise Levels
7. Hearing Safety Measures for Headset Users
8. Hearing Assessments for Headset Users
9. Following Up Results of Hearing Assessments
10. Health and Safety Delegates and Committees
11. Safe Workplace Checklist
12. Contacts and Resources

Produced by the ACTU Call Centre Unions: Make the call, join your union.

Headset Safety Resource Kit

What is acoustic shock?

Acoustic Shock (or Acute Aural Trauma) is a relatively new condition, however it has been documented as far back as the 1970's.

It has been described as a psychological response to a sudden, loud sound (also known as an acoustic incident or spiking) heard from handsets and headsets of telephones.

The cause of the condition is believed to be a hypersensitive neurological reflex (startle reflex) that is related to stress.

Call centre workers usually remove their headset within seconds of an acoustic incident and extreme cases can fall to the ground.

With the occurrence of an acoustic incident, the person's reflex is stimulated or activated and takes time to return to its normal state. It is believed that a stressed individual will exhibit this response more easily than someone who is not stressed.

With repeated exposure to sound in the affected ear soon after the initial incident, the person's reflex may remain in the same stimulated state. This reflex is exaggerated further if another acoustic event occurs. Poor identification and management of an acoustic incident at this stage may be attributed to the development of ongoing impairment.

Call centre workers are thought to be at increased risk because of the time they spend on the phone and because the high stress of the job makes them more susceptible to acoustic injury.

With the rapid growth of the call centre industry and the associated headset use, acoustic injuries may become more common.

This kit outlines a number of measures that your call centre should put in place to prevent the risk of acoustic shock in your workplace. The kit is designed to:

- inform and assist workplace health and safety delegates about hearing safety;
- inform all call centre employees of the risks and prevention of headset injuries; and
- encourage and assist management in adopting an active role in preventing acoustic shock injuries in their workplace.

The kit is a basic outline of the key issues and prevention strategies call centres should adopt to minimise the risk of acoustic injury in the workplace. More detail should be accessed through your union's health and safety expert.

Produced by the ACTU Call Centre Unions: Make the call, join your union.

Headset Safety Resource Kit

Symptoms of acoustic shock

Symptoms may include:

- Physiological symptoms including tinnitus (ringing in the ears)
- Vertigo (dizziness and loss of balance)
- A feeling of pressure or fullness in the ear
- Facial numbness and tingling
- Tenderness or soreness around the ear and neck
- Ear pain and burning sensations
- Hearing loss may occur in very few cases
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Anxiety
- Feelings of vulnerability.

We recommend that you first contact your workplace health and safety delegate if you think you may have any of these symptoms. Your conversation is confidential and your delegate will be able to advise you of your options.

If your workplace does not have a workplace health and safety delegate, your union office will have an expert that you can talk to confidentially.

You can contact your union on:

If you are unsure how to contact your union, call the ACTU Hotline on 1300 365 205.

You should also inform your supervisor or management, particularly if you feel you may require special duties or that others at work may also be at risk.

Produced by the ACTU Call Centre Unions: Make the call, join your union.

Headset Safety Resource Kit

Dealing With Acoustic Shock Incidents

1. Remove headset immediately and stop work.
2. Report the event to your health and safety delegate or union and to your supervisor or management.
3. Ensure the event is recorded and logged in an incident report.
4. Discontinue to use the headset in the affected ear.
5. Check the headset for clarity of sound before further use.
6. Talk to your health and safety delegate, union organiser or supervisor about ensuring you are protected if you develop further symptoms.
7. Where ongoing symptoms persist see an audiologist for review.
8. If you have significant symptoms, talk to your health and safety representative, union organiser or supervisor about your options.
9. Any Questions? Contact your union office on:

Or call the ACTU Hotline for call centre employees on 1300 365 205

Headset Safety Resource Kit

Acoustic Shock Risk Factors

To prevent the occurrence of acoustic shock injuries, you should be aware of the organisational risk factors that may exist in your call centre.

1. Sudden loud sound through headset

Typical examples of sounds include mis-directed faxes, faults in handsets (feedback between microphone and earphone), alarms at the other end of the phone (microwave ovens, smoke alarms etc), mobile phones and even customer rage.

It is not the loudness of the sound that is significant (all Australian Communications Association approved phones and headsets are limited to 120 dBA) but the sudden rise in noise level which triggers the 'startle reflex' response in the ear. Damage to hearing from a sudden loud or an impulsive noise alone is not believed to occur below 120dBA. Nevertheless, the recommended limit for call centre workers is between 85 to 95 dBA.

2. Poor identification and management of an acoustic incident

Where an acoustic incident is not reported or dealt with adequately, the call centre operator may be instructed to continue to work wearing the headset. This may lead to further development of the condition.

3. Stressful working environment

Stress and anxiety are considered to be primary contributors to the development of acoustic shock.

Common stress factors include:

- No breaks between calls
- No regular breaks off the phone
- Inadequate equipment
- Unrealistic performance targets
- Excessive call monitoring
- Inappropriate (bullying) management style
- Repetitive work organisation
- Inadequate technical and informational support
- Juggling of customers needs and performance targets

Produced by the ACTU Call Centre Unions: Make the call, join your union.

Headset Safety Resource Kit

Recommended Strategies to Minimise Risk of Acoustic Shock

If you have any workplace risk factors, the following strategies may be implemented to minimise the risk of acoustic injuries:

- Adopt appropriate strategies to minimise workplace noise.
- Attachment of an Acoustic Shock Protection Device, can prevent many of (but not all) potentially damaging acoustic levels or content reaching the headset wearer's eardrum.
- Ensure staff are trained in the proper fitting and use of headsets.
- Implement procedures for the identification and removal of faulty headsets.
- Ensure all staff and supervisors are trained in the identification of acoustic shock and follow the correct steps in the event of an acoustic incident.
- Eliminate other causes of stress in the call centre environment.

Managing Noise Levels

Strategies to minimise workplace noise include:

- Ensure proper acoustic treatment of the call centre
- Ensure work areas are adequately separated
- Discourage mobile phone use in call centre areas
- Minimise use of fax machines or printers in the area
- Isolate call centres from other noisy work areas
- Train staff working near headset users in the need to minimise noise
- Train headset users and their managers in how to manage headset equipment and the work environment
- Ensure headset volumes are set appropriately

Produced by the ACTU Call Centre Unions: Make the call, join your union.

Headset Safety Resource Kit

Headset User Hearing Safety Measures

Recommended strategies to minimise the risk of headset injuries include:

- Ensuring regular ear testing
- Setting the volume on headset amplifiers as low as possible
- Replacing batteries in headsets regularly
- Eliminating other workplace environment sources of stress such as inadequate lighting, screen-based equipment and poor air quality
- Reporting faulty headsets immediately and discontinue use.

Infection Control

Due to close exposure of headsets to the external ear canal and the mouth, infection control procedures are necessary to prevent the spread of infection between workers.

- Each individual worker should be supplied with their own headset that is not shared with other workers. This reduces the risk of cross infection.
- Where this is not possible, headsets (ear and mouthpiece) should always be cleaned using cleansing wipes between users. Foam covers (if appropriate for the headset) should also be replaced. Work time should be allocated for this.
- All staff should be trained in infection control and headset use, and regular cleaning and maintenance of headsets.

Produced by the ACTU Call Centre Unions: Make the call, join your union.

Headset Safety Resource Kit

Health Assessments for Headset Work

Who may need an assessment?

New recruits and all staff required to use a headset as a primary requirement for their job (eg call centre or help desk operator).

Why?

- to determine any risks to new employees in using a headset;
- to establish a baseline level of hearing against which any damage can be measured;
- to assess whether there has been any damage to the auditory system following exposure to a high pitched tone.

When?

- before new staff begin headset work (baseline assessment)
- on referral following a baseline assessment
- regularly (at least once a year) during periods of headset use
- after exposure to high pitched tone.

(Note: all headset users with no previous assessment in your call centre will need a baseline assessment.)

Selecting a Health Service Provider

Either an audiometrist or an audiologist may be used for hearing assessment.

A list of audiologists and audiometrists you can consult free of charge available through workers health centres is on page 13. Most workers health centres are able to send an expert out to inspect your workplace if requested.

If you cannot access a workers health centre, you will find audiometrists and audiologists by checking the Yellow Pages under Hearing Conservation Services. Some audiometrists dispense hearing aids and may be found by looking under the Hearing Aids section. You can contact your health and safety delegate, union or supervisor to see if they can recommend someone.

Audiometrists usually charge a fee for each baseline test. Their fees may be lower than an audiologist's because they are only able to conduct pre employment and baseline testing. Audiologists usually charge by the hour and baseline tests should take around 15 minutes.

Produced by the ACTU Call Centre Unions: Make the call, join your union.

Headset Safety Resource Kit

Arranging an Assessment

1. If you are arranging a baseline assessment you will need to decide if you want an audiometrist or an audiologist to do the assessment. Selecting an audiologist in the first place, especially where you suspect hearing problems, means that any further assessment required can be done at the same time.
2. Make an appointment with the audiometrist/audiologist
3. In order to ensure that the hearing assessment is accurate you must avoid exposure to excessive noise for at least 16 hours before the appointment.
4. Take all documents to the service provider at the time and place specified
5. If there are any previous hearing assessments, take these along too.

Handling the Results of a Hearing Assessment

If the assessment indicates the possibility of some hearing loss that may affect your ability to be able to do the job, a further hearing assessment is required.

You should implement any recommendations that the service provider has made on their report form. For example, recommendations may be made for making reasonable adjustments to the workplace or work arrangements in order to accommodate a person's hearing loss. You should consult with your health and safety rep, union organiser and management to arrange this.

If you are unclear about, or unhappy with the assessment you receive, or the implementation of recommended changes at work, do not hesitate to contact your health and safety delegate or union.

Make sure you keep a copy of the assessment report for your own records.

Produced by the ACTU Call Centre Unions: Make the call, join your union.

Headset Safety Resource Kit

Training and Risk Prevention in the Workplace

Occupational Health and Safety Delegates

You should have an independent Occupational Health and Safety delegate structure in your workplace. You should be able to directly elect the person you think will be able to represent your interests best. The delegate can come from any classification level or work area. There are guidelines on how many delegates you will need to cover all employees in your work area. Contact your union or human resources department to find out what the right number of delegates your workplace needs is. You could start by roughly aiming to have at least one delegate on each floor or distinct work area.

Role of Occupational Health and Safety delegates

The role of the delegate is to represent your interests in all matters relating to your health and safety at work. Delegates should be given appropriate flexibility during work time to perform their responsibilities. The responsibilities and powers of occupational health and safety delegates are substantial and serious. The occupational health and safety delegate has a wide range of legally enforceable powers to ensure that workers under their eye are not put at risk. As a result, it is important that any newly elected delegates are fully trained in occupational health and safety legislation and policy.

Occupational Health and Safety Committees

Usually, especially in larger workplaces, all the elected health and safety delegates meet to form a committee. The committee should meet regularly to exchange information about what is happening in their areas, see if there are any common causes across the different areas and plan appropriate prevention strategies and plans. This committee should be active in working with management to improve health and safety conditions at work.

Role of union delegate

The union delegate and the occupational health and safety delegate should work closely together. Employees can approach either if they wish to take up a health and safety issue. The union delegate should refer the issue to the health and safety delegate, but they should continue to work together to resolve the issue.

Delegate training

Your union runs training for occupational health and safety delegates. A number of courses are usually run each year and you should be given time off work to attend the right course for you. Contact your union office to find out when their courses are.

Produced by the ACTU Call Centre Unions: Make the call, join your union.

Headset Safety Resource Kit

Checklist:

- Are any employees complaining of symptoms such as those listed on p. 2?**
- Does your workplace have any acoustic shock risk factors such as:**
 - sudden loud sounds through headsets
 - poor identification and management of an acoustic incidents
 - a stressful working environment?
- Are the correct steps followed in the event of acoustic shock?**
 - Employees remove headset immediately and stop work
 - Employees report the event to their health and safety delegate or union and to their supervisor or management
 - The event is recorded and logged in an incident report
 - Employees discontinue to use the headset use in the affected ear
 - The headset is checked for clarity of sound before further use
 - If the employee develops further symptoms they approach their health and safety delegate or union organiser about ensuring they are protected
 - Where ongoing symptoms persist employees see an audiologist for review
 - If employees have significant symptoms, they discuss their options with their health and safety representative or union organiser.
- Has the workplace adopted strategies to minimise workplace noise:**
 - Ensuring proper acoustic treatment of the call centre
 - Ensuring work areas are adequately separated
 - Discouraging mobile phone use in call centre areas
 - Minimising the use of fax machines or printers in the area
 - Isolating call centres from other noisy work areas
 - Training staff working near headset users in the need to minimise noise
 - Training headset users and their managers in how to manage headset equipment and the work environment
- Has your workplace adopted strategies to minimise workplace noise:**
 - Ensuring headset volumes are set appropriately
 - attachment of an acoustic shock protection device
 - ensuring staff are trained in the proper fitting and use of headsets
 - implementing policies and procedures for the identification and removal of faulty headsets
 - ensuring all staff and supervisors are trained in the identification and what steps to take in event of acoustic shock incidents
 - eliminating other causes of stress in the call centre environment?

Produced by the ACTU Call Centre Unions: Make the call, join your union.

Headset Safety Resource Kit

Checklist:

- Has your workplace implemented hearing safety measures:**
 - Regular ear testing
 - Volume on headset amplifiers set as low as possible
 - Batteries in headsets replaced regularly
 - Workplace environment sources of stress such as inadequate lighting, screen-based equipment and poor air quality eliminated
 - Faulty headsets immediately reported and use discontinued.
 - Usage of telephones in electrical storms minimised?
- Does your workplace have strategies for infection control:**
 - Each individual worker is supplied with their own headset that is not shared with other workers
 - Where this is not possible, headsets (ear and mouthpiece) are always cleaned using cleansing wipes between users.
 - Foam covers (if appropriate for the headset) should also be replaced. Work time is allocated for this.
 - All staff are trained in infection control and headset use, and regular cleaning and maintenance of headsets.
- Has management identified employees who need hearing assessments?**
 - New staff before beginning headset work (baseline assessment)
 - Employees who have been referred following a baseline assessment
 - All staff regularly (at least once a year) during periods of headset use
 - Any employee who has been exposed to high pitched tone
- Does your workplace assist in arranging hearing assessments?**
 - Making an appointment with an audiometrist/audiologist
 - Copies of assessment forms to provide employees
 - Policies for implementing any recommended workplace changes
- Do you have an independent Health and Safety Structure at work?**
 - Elected Occupational Health and Safety delegates for each work area
 - Are all the Health and Safety delegates trained?
 - Are the Occupational Health and Safety Committees active?

Any Questions? Contact your union office on:

Or call the (ACTU) Hotline for call centre employees on 1300 365 205

Produced by the ACTU Call Centre Unions: Make the call, join your union.

Headset Safety Resource Kit

Resources

Workers Health Centres

Victoria

Workers Occupational health Centre
Trades Hall
54 Victoria Street
Carlton South
Victoria 3053
Tel: (03) 9662 4820

Queensland

Workers Health Centre
117 Ipswich Road
Woolloongabba
QLD 4102
Tel: (07) 3217 3944

New South Wales

Workers Health Centre
133 Parramatta Road
Granville NSW 2142
Tel: (02) 9897 2466

Workers Health Centre
406 King Street
Newcastle west
NSW 2302
Tel: (02) 4929 2952

Workers Health Centre
Trade Union Centre
1 Lowden Square
Wollongong
NSW 2500
Tel: (02) 4229 2888

Your Union

Australian Services Union (ASU)

Tel: (03) 9342 1400
E-mail: Asunatm@asu.asn.au

Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU)

Tel: 1300 137 636
E-mail: members@cpsu.org

Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU)

Tel: (03) 9349 2100
E-Mail: cddo@cepu.asn.au

Finance Sector Union (FSU)

Tel: (03) 9261 5300
E-mail: fsuinfo@fsunion.org.au

For all other unions, or if you are not sure which union to contact call the ACTU call centre hotline on: 1300 365 205 or e-mail: callcentral@actu.asn.au

Produced by the ACTU Call Centre Unions: Make the call, join your union.