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Your ears may be covered but are you protected?

Most safety helmets have a facility, usually an accessory slot at each side, to allow them to be fitted with earmuffs and other accessories. Also, many manufacturers offer helmet mounted earmuffs specifically for the purpose. Often the fitting points of the helmet and earmuff are of a 'standard' size and style, but here a significant issue arises:

If you select a helmet and earmuffs from the same manufacturer, it is likely that they have been approved for use together. The manufacturer in question should make this clear in the product information. If, however, you select a helmet from one manufacturer, and helmet mounted earmuffs from another, they may well fit together, but ***unless you can see that they have been performance tested together there is nothing to show the earmuffs will provide protection!***

One of the features determining the performance of earmuffs is the force produced by the spring arm. This is to maintain the seal of the cushion around your ear.

You may have selected the most suitable helmet for you or your workforce, and also the most appropriate earmuff for the noise hazard, also taking into account weight, comfort, user acceptance, etc, but without testing for use in combination you cannot assume that the earmuff will provide the expected protection.

Both the helmet and the earmuffs should be CE marked. This mark shows that a product meets the necessary legal requirements however it does not tell you anything about its performance for any given application or task.

There are different ways to gain the CE mark but the most common is to have a product certified using a harmonised European standard (see 'CE Marking and Product Certification' below). For helmet mounted earmuffs the standard is EN352-3, and it requires products to be tested together and manufacturers to specify the models of helmet tested with the earmuffs.

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There are many helmet manufacturers who produce earmuffs for use with their helmets. There are also many manufacturers who specialise in producing one or the other, and distributors will offer a range of both products to give you the best choice.

If you select products from different sources make sure you check that the earmuffs have been tested on the specific make and model of helmet with which you plan to use them.

Manufacturers are well aware of the situation and many co-operate to have their products tested together, so that the customer can select the combination they prefer as the most appropriate.

So, if you want to use an earmuff with a particular helmet, make sure they have been certified together. Remember, Your ears may be covered but are you protected?

CE Marking and Product Certification:

It is a legal requirement for any item of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) offered for sale within the EU to carry the CE mark. This mark can be applied if the PPE can be shown to comply with all applicable Essential Health and Safety Requirements (EHSRs) of the PPE Regulation 2016/425. One of those EHSRs requires different types of PPE to be compatible if they are worn together, so that the fit and/or function of one type is not affected by using or wearing the other, but this only refers to different types made by the same manufacturer.

Manufacturers can choose to have products tested for performance to a harmonised EN Standard, and certification using that standard also carries a presumption of conformity with the EHSRs of the Regulation, so they can be CE marked. Certification using an EN Standard is therefore the most common route for PPE to gain the CE mark. There is a suite of EN Standards for Hearing Protection which is numbered EN 352 and includes many parts . EN 352-1 sets performance requirements for earmuffs on a headband or neckband, which is how they would be worn when used alone, but EN 352-3 is specifically for helmet mounted earmuffs and the requirements are different, acknowledging the fact that a spring arm attached to a helmet performs differently to a headband.

There is an added benefit to users under PPE Regulation 2016/425 that all protection against harmful noise has moved to the highest risk category, Cat III. Under the previous regulation (PPE Directive 89/686/EEC) hearing protection was classified as Cat II, and so would have been tested for certification to the relevant EN Standard once before launch. Now, as Cat III, it will also be subject to ongoing surveillance which means that at least annually either new samples of the product will be tested, or the manufacturer's quality programme for ongoing compliance will be audited. This will certainly help to ensure product performance and compatibility with other PPE is kept up to date.

SO TAKE SOME STRAIGHTFORWARD ACTION NOW AND AVOID LONG TERM DAMAGE WHEN IT'S TOO LATE TO CORRECT IT

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