I am sure that we can all agree that we live in an increasingly noisy world. Not only does the overall noise level seem to be going up, but we are surrounded by a growing number of tools, toys, and other gadgets, that make noise and they make a lot of it. Some people may think a farm is a quiet place, but if you live or work on one, you know that isn’t always the case. Combines, tractors and even farm animals can create a noisy environment. Whether the noise is man-made or a part of nature, these things can be putting your hearing at risk.

Hearing loss that occurs because of too much noise is called noise induced hearing loss. This hearing loss occurs when the tiny sensory cells in the inner ear are damaged by sounds that are too loud and that last too long. What is sad about hearing loss is this way, is that it is preventable and once it hearing loss occurs it is permanent. Studies show that children, as young as 8 to 12 years of age, are at a great time to start learning healthy habits that can protect their hearing.

Sound is measured in units called decibels. The softest sound that healthy ears can hear is 0 decibels. By comparison, a whisper measures 30 decibels and a normal conversation measures 60 decibels.

A farm tractor without a cab or a pig squeal can reach 100 decibels or higher. A chainsaw can reach 110 decibels or higher while in use. Remember, prolonged exposure to any noise at or above 85 decibels can cause gradual hearing loss.

Your ears can be your warning system for potentially dangerous noise levels. The noise is too loud if you have to raise your voice to be understood by someone standing nearby, the noise hurts your ears, you develop a buzzing or ringing sound in your ears, even temporarily, or you don’t hear as well as you normally do until several hours after you get away from the noise.

If you are around noise at high levels precautions need to be taken to prevent hearing loss. Some actions that can be taken are: 1) Block the noise, this can be done by wearing earplugs or earmuffs, 2) Walk away from the noise, 3) if possible turn down the sound, 4) keep machinery running smoothly with routine maintenance, 5) put a barrier between you and the noise, 6) plan your work area and routine to limit your time near noise, 7) turn machinery off when it is not needed or 8) use idle or lower speeds whenever possible.

How can we protect our families from excessive farm noise?

Be aware of noise levels that put hearing at risk, get comfortable hearing protectors and get comfortable using them, point out situations when family members should practice healthy safety and let you family and others know situations where family members should practice hearing safety.

It is important to remember the 4 P’s of Noise Induced Hearing Loss. It is Painless, Progressive, Permanent, but it is also Preventable!

Sound ideas is a noise induction hearing loss program of the Arkansas AgrAbility Project. For more information on Sound Ideas or Arkansas AgrAbility, contact the Newton County Cooperative Extension Service at 446-2240.

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** Information gained from www.noisyplanet.nidcd.nih.gov; Noise Induced Hearing Loss, pamphlet, Arkansas ArgAbility Program.