



HEALTH AND SAFETY
GUIDANCE NOTE

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & STRESS



NFU Mutual

Risk Management Services

INTRODUCTION

Occupational health is concerned with how work and the work environment can affect an employee's health and equally how an employee's health can affect their ability to do the job. Its main aim is to prevent, rather than cure ill health from wherever it arises in the workplace.

Occupational health is generally more difficult to manage than safety. The causes and consequences of poor safety at work are immediate and often relatively easy to deal with. Work-related causes of ill health can be more difficult to spot. It can often take some time for symptoms to develop so the connection between cause and effect is less obvious, but once the problems have been recognised and acknowledged, solutions are now well documented.

For the most common occupational health problems, such as back injuries, there may be other causes that have nothing to do with work. Workers may be unwilling to admit to themselves that they have work-related health problems because of fears about their job or the stigma attached to certain types of illness. For these reasons it is doubly important to identify and reduce aggravating factors arising from work.

WHAT ARE THE HAZARDS RELATING TO OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH?

Health hazards can come from various sources. They include:

- **Biological** – exposure to bacteria and viruses can lead to transmission of disease to humans e.g. anthrax, hepatitis, Weil's disease (leptospirosis);
- **Chemical** – exposure to certain chemicals can cause various illnesses or conditions e.g. intoxication, allergy, asthma, cancer;
- **Musculoskeletal** – conditions affecting the body which may arise from poor manual handling techniques, repetitive movements etc.;
- **Physical** – exposure to noise, vibration, extremes of temperature, radiation etc.;
- **Psychosocial** – situations affecting mental and physical health (e.g. stress), which may be caused by excessive work pressures, bullying or racism, redeployment, redundancy etc.

WHAT ARE MY LEGAL RESPONSIBILITIES?

You have a legal and moral responsibility to do whatever is reasonably practicable to prevent work related ill health. In addition to compliance with general duties under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 [Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978] and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations [Management of Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Regulations], some more specific legal duties are relevant to the common health problems. For example, the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (COSHH) and Approved Code of Practice deals with substances that cause asthma. COSHH is also relevant for dermatitis and the Manual Handling Operations Regulations are relevant for many musculoskeletal disorders (MSD).

RISK ASSESSMENT

In order to safeguard workers' health, the cause of occupational health risks must first be known. Once the main risks (Musculoskeletal, dust, noise, stress etc.) are determined, action can be taken to risk assess these topics individually in the same way as safety issues. It is important to determine not only the individuals (or groups of individuals) exposed to these risks but also the degree to which they are exposed and likely consequences. This knowledge will also be useful when recruiting personnel, or during rehabilitation, to ensure the work environment does not adversely affect any pre-existing medical condition.

Guidance on how to carry out risk assessments are covered in a separate guidance note.

HOW CAN I CONTROL THE RISK OF WORK RELATED ILLNESS?

Often the process of managing occupational health only requires good communication between managers and workers. There is usually no need to employ specialist assistance or experts; however, involvement of occupational physicians and specialists can be required and cost effective in appropriate circumstances.

Occupational Health covers a range of activities, including:

- Identification and assessment of the risks from health hazards in the workplace. This involves surveillance of the factors in the working environment and working practices which may affect workers' health. It also requires a systematic approach to the analysis of accidents and occupational diseases;
- Advising on planning and organisation of work and working practices, including the design of workplaces, and on the evaluation, choice and maintenance of equipment and on substances used at work. In so doing, the adaptation of work to the worker is promoted;
- Providing advice, information, training and education, on occupational health, safety and hygiene and on ergonomics and protective equipment;
- Surveillance of workers' health in relation to work;
- Contributing to occupational rehabilitation;
- Organising first aid and emergency treatment.

PRE-EMPLOYMENT AND ANNUAL HEALTH SCREENING

Pre-employment health screening, which is repeated on an annual basis, is probably the most common type of occupational health examination. **The objective of such screening can vary, but usually relates to:**

- Assessing fitness for a particular job and its risks to health;

- Identifying health problems which might cause an employee to have time off work in the future and identify adaptations needed to the workplace;
- Providing "baseline" assessments (i.e. to provide an indication of the potential employee's fitness against which future measurements may be compared);
- Assessing fitness for pension schemes.

Some employers prefer to send potential employees to a doctor for a "medical". Such a medical examination commonly consists of a standard clinical assessment which is carried out without reference to the above objectives.

However, the most cost-effective means of undertaking a pre-employment / annual health screening is by the use of a health questionnaire accompanied by a 'role profile' that is reviewed by an occupational health professional and which may be followed by a health or medical examination where necessary. An example of a pre-employment health questionnaire is included at the end of this guidance document.

Please note: The information provided in a health questionnaire is subject to data protection laws and should therefore never be reviewed by persons that are not medical professionals. Equally only medical professionals can assess a person's fitness for work.

HEALTH SURVEILLANCE

Health surveillance is a system of ongoing health checks of your employees. The objective of routine health surveillance is to monitor the health of employees that are at risk of the hazards outlined and to identify at the earliest possible stage any adverse condition caused by their work.

Health surveillance is NOT a substitute for controlling health risks at work. Health surveillance can sometimes be used to help identify where more needs to be done to control risks and where early signs of work-related ill health are detected, you should take action to prevent further harm and protect employees.

In addition to the obvious benefits of keeping your employees fit and healthy, such as a reduction in short and long term absence, improved productivity, reduced employees turnover etc, there are a number of important benefits to conducting health surveillance to your business, as it allows you to:

- Detect harmful ill health effects at an early stage, therefore protecting employees and confirming whether they are still fit to do their jobs;
- Check that control measures are working properly and identify where further controls may be required and what they may be;
- Support your risk assessments with specific data from health records;
- Provide employees with an opportunity to receive health training and information regarding their jobs;
- Give employees a chance to voice any concern on the effect of their work on their health.

WHEN DO I NEED TO CARRY OUT HEALTH SURVEILLANCE FOR MY EMPLOYEES?

Health surveillance may be required by law for employees who are exposed to significant levels of noise or vibration, ionising radiation, solvents, fumes, dusts, biological agents and other substances hazardous to health, or work in compressed air, as identified in your risk assessment.

Aside from the above conditions, health surveillance is required if the answer is “yes” to any of the following questions:

- Is it reasonably likely that ill health may occur under the particular conditions at work?
- Are there valid ways to detect the disease or condition? Health surveillance is only useful where it can reliably demonstrate that damage to health is beginning to occur or is becoming likely. A technique is only useful if it provides accurate results and is safe and practicable.
- Is surveillance likely to benefit the employee?
- Is the work known to damage health in a particular way?

For example, the above criteria would be met in the following circumstances:

- High noise levels are known to result in hearing loss;
- Hearing tests (valid technique) can detect the effect of noise on individuals’ hearing;

- Hearing tests are of benefit as they can identify individuals at risk so that additional control measures can be implemented to protect them and improve working conditions.

Other cases where health surveillance may be required include:

- There is a history of work related illness in the workplace;
- There is a heavy reliance on Personal Protective Equipment to control risks, which is known to be highly dependent on people wearing them correctly;
- Evidence of ill health in the particular industry.

Examples of health surveillance include:

- Audiometric tests for employees exposed to noise;
- Skin surveillance for employees exposed to oils and other potentially harmful chemicals;
- Lung function tests for employees exposed to dust and other respiratory sensitisers;
- Hand arm vibration questionnaires for users of hand held vibratory equipment.

Health surveillance can be a clinical examination or a basic health questionnaire vetted by an occupational health professional or competent ‘responsible’ person. Where there is a need for particular tests to be carried out (e.g. lung function testing), then the services of an Occupational Health Professional will be needed.

HEALTH SURVEILLANCE RECORDS

Health surveillance records must be retained for up to 40 years from the date of the last entry. However, some regulations may require you to keep them for much longer as ill-health effects might not emerge for a very long time after exposure, sometimes years or even decades.

If you are unsure about the type / level of surveillance or examination that is appropriate for your business, you need to speak to an occupational health specialist.

STATUTORY AND “NON-STATUTORY” MEDICAL EXAMINATIONS

There are some Regulations that specifically require periodic medical examinations in relation to the following:

- Exposure to asbestos;
- Exposure to lead;
- Exposure to ionising radiation;
- Diving activities;
- Working in compressed air;
- Substances listed in schedule 6 of the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2000 [Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003].

By their nature, statutory examinations are pass / fail medical examinations and if, in the opinion of the examining physician, an employee is not fit, he / she would not be able to continue working in his / her current role.

The term ‘non-statutory’ applies to situations where there is no specific Regulation which states that a periodic medical examination must be carried out, but because there is a significant risk to health or safety i.e. fork lift truck operator, work in confined spaces, etc. it is recommended that an appropriate medical examination by a competent professional is undertaken.

HEALTH MONITORING

Health monitoring is an informal, non-statutory method of surveying your workforce for symptoms of ill health. This type of occupational health management system can enable you, as an employer, to be aware of health problems and intervene to prevent problems being caused or made worse by work activities. Another important role of health monitoring is to feedback into a system that reviews the current control methods in place.

STRESS

Work related stress is described by the Health & Safety Executive as “An adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work”. It is not an illness in itself, but if stress is intense and goes on for some time, it

can lead to mental and physical ill health (e.g. depression, nervous breakdown, heart disease, etc.).

Work is generally good for people’s wellbeing but can place demands and pressures on everyone at times. Appropriate amounts can stimulate and motivate, however, it is important to be able to recognise the point at which pressure on individuals becomes too excessive for them to cope with, or not demanding enough (resulting in boredom, feeling a lack of control over the job they do etc.). Stress is a natural reaction to too much or too little pressure.

UNDERSTANDING AND RECOGNISING STRESS

When the body perceives a threat, it goes into a state of high alert. This is sometimes referred to as the “fight and flight” response. The resultant release of adrenalin and other substances in the blood are invaluable if, for example, we have to fight an attacker or run from danger. Repeated triggering of this response can lead to the body being constantly in a state of alert, without the release of energy which follows a physical threat. This can result in a variety of symptoms such as:

- **Physical** – tenseness, panic attacks, tiredness, shoulder and back ache, appetite disturbance, light headedness, high blood pressure, tingling in arms and legs, insomnia, indigestion, headaches, lower resistance to infection, rashes and dizziness etc.
- **Emotional** – anxiety, despair, depression, frustration, irritability, moodiness, anger, desire to cry, withdrawal, loss of interest and pleasure in life, rapid mood swings etc.
- **Mental** – impaired perception, lowered concentration, circular thinking, reduced problem-solving skills, judgement, indecisiveness, reduced creativity, inaccuracy, less motivation etc.

We often increase our use of caffeine, nicotine, alcohol or drugs when we are stressed. All of these are likely to make the problems worse as they stimulate the production of more adrenalin which increases the ‘fight or flight’ response. Changes in a person’s “normal” behaviour are usually an indication that someone is not coping and that they may be suffering from stress that could be work related.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CAUSES OF STRESS AND WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT THEM?

The table below is a brief summary of how employment relations relate to the main causes of stress and what you can do about them to reduce the risk of work related stress.

| Main causes of stress: | What you can do about it: |
|---|---|
| Demands: Employees often become overloaded if they cannot cope with the amount of work or type of work they are asked to do. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Make sure employees understand what they have to do and how to do it. ● Meet training needs. ● Consider whether working flexible hours would help employees to manage demands. |
| Control: Employees can feel disaffected and perform poorly if they have no say over how and when they do their work. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Involve employees in the way work is carried out. ● Consult employees about decisions. ● Build effective teams with responsibility for outcomes. ● Review performance to identify strengths and weaknesses. |
| Support: Levels of sick absence often rise if employees feel they cannot talk to managers about issues that are troubling them. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give employees the opportunity to talk about issues causing stress. ● Be sympathetic and supportive. ● Keep employees informed about what is going on in the firm. |
| Relationships: A failure to build relationships based on good behaviour and trust can lead to problems related to discipline, grievances and bullying. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Have clear procedures for handling misconduct and poor performance. ● Have clear procedures for employees to raise grievances. ● Tackle any instances of bullying and harassment and make it clear such behaviour will not be tolerated. |
| Role: Employees will feel anxious about their work and the organisation if they don't know what is expected of them. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Carry out a thorough induction for new employees using a checklist of what needs to be covered. ● Provide employees with a written statement of employment particulars. ● Give employees clear job descriptions. ● Maintain a close link between individual objectives and organisational goals. |
| Change: Change needs to be managed effectively or it can lead to uncertainty and insecurity. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Plan ahead so changes can be signposted and managers and employees are prepared. ● Consult with employees about prospective changes so they have a real input and work together with you to solve problems. |

FURTHER GUIDANCE

- HSE website “Health Surveillance” www.hse.gov.uk/health-surveillance/index.htm
- HSE website “Tackling Occupational Disease” www.hse.gov.uk/aboutus/occupational-disease/
- HSE website “Work Related Stress” www.hse.gov.uk/stress/
- Working together to prevent sickness absence becoming job loss www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/web02.pdf
- HSG249 Managing sickness absence and return to work: An employers’ and managers’ guide
www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/priced/hsg249.pdf
- INDG397 Off work sick and worried about your job? Steps you can take to help your return to work
www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg397.pdf
- INDG399 Managing sickness absence and return to work in small businesses
www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg399.pdf

These documents are available to download free of charge from www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books or direct from the HSE website.

PRE-EMPLOYMENT HEALTH QUESTIONNAIRE

Surname:..... First Name:..... Date of Birth:.....

Address:.....

GP Name & Address:.....

What job have you applied for?.....

Please answer the following questions by ticking the appropriate box. If you answer 'yes' to any of the questions please give more detail at the end of the questionnaire, or if necessary on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Have you ever suffered repeatedly or recently from:

| Condition | Yes | Date | Condition | Yes | Date |
|---|-----|------|--|-----|------|
| Bronchitis or productive cough | | | Heart condition | | |
| Asthma/ lung condition | | | Blood pressure problems | | |
| Hay fever | | | Diabetes | | |
| Recurrent headaches or migraines/ eye complaints | | | Thyroid problems | | |
| Back/ neck problems/ Rheumatism/ Arthritis | | | Kidney or urinary problems | | |
| Hernias | | | Epilepsy/ fits or blackouts | | |
| Ear/ nose/ mouth/ throat problems | | | Mental health problems/ phobias | | |
| Stomach/ bowel problems | | | Ill whilst abroad | | |
| Tuberculosis | | | Hepatitis/ liver problems | | |
| Typhoid/paratyphoid | | | Diarrhoea/ vomiting | | |
| Salmonella/ campylobacter/ E.coli | | | Loss of hearing/ Deafness | | |
| Skin problems/ Dermatitis | | | Any other significant illness or injury (excluding coughs/ cold/flu etc.) | | |
| Face/ wrist hand problems (including HAVS/ vibration white finger) | | | | | |

2. What is your height? _____ What is your weight? _____

3. Do you smoke? Yes No

If yes, how many? _____ (per day)

4. How many units of alcohol do you drink on average per week? _____ (units)

5. Have you ever had an illness or operation requiring hospital admission? Yes No

If yes, please provide details: _____

6. Do you wear spectacles or contact lenses? Yes No

7. Do you have difficulty recognising colours? Yes No

8. Do you have any problems with your teeth? Yes No

If yes, please provide details: _____

9. Do you have any allergies? Yes No

If yes, please provide details: _____

10. Do you or have you had any problems related to alcohol or drug abuse? Yes No

11. Are you taking any medication or receiving treatment? Yes No

If yes, please provide details: _____

12. When did you last have a tetanus injection? ____/____/____

13. How many days and episodes of absence from work have you had in the last 12 months? _____

14. Have you ever worked for the business before? Yes No

| PREVIOUS OCCUPATIONS & EMPLOYERS | DATES EMPLOYED | | HAZARD EXPOSURE (tick appropriate box for YES answers and describe below) | | | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------|--------|---|-----------------|-----------|-------|-----------|
| | From M/Y | To M/Y | Dust | Manual Handling | Chemicals | Noise | Radiation |
| | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |

15. Describe what types of hazards you were exposed to:

16. Have you ever suffered health problems following any of these exposures? Yes No

17. Have you ever undergone health surveillance due to your previous job(s)? Yes No

18. Have you been advised for medical reasons not to do night work, shift work or any other kind of work? Yes No

Applications from people with disabilities are welcome. We will ensure appropriate support is provided (where required) if you are called for an assessment.

19. Do you consider that you have a health problem that would prevent you from undertaking the proposed work? Yes No

See Note 1 for a description of the activities that you may encounter during your employment with us.

20. Have you been registered disabled? Yes No

21. If called in for an assessment is there any special support you will require? Yes No

If yes, please provide details: _____

22. Do you feel that any special aids or equipment would be required to take account of your health problems and assist you? Yes No

If yes, please provide details: _____

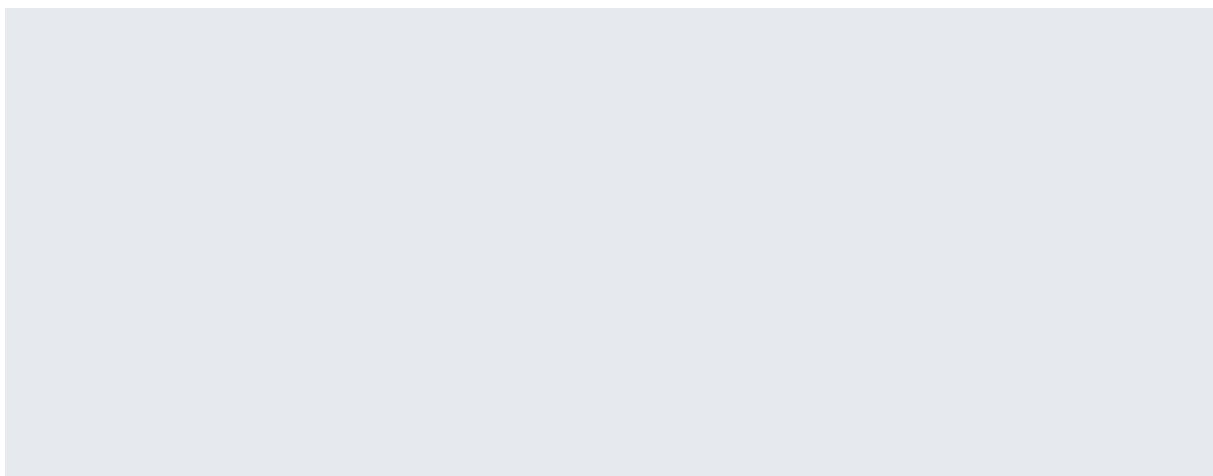
I declare that the above information is correct and complete and I have no other defect, disorder or other medical condition, mental or physical not already mentioned. I consent to a report regarding my fitness to undertake the duties of my proposed employment to Human Resources and Management. I further understand that giving false information will result in disciplinary action, which may include dismissal, or any offer of employment may be withdrawn. Any claim for pension scheme benefits may become invalid. I am willing to be examined medically and to have any further screening as deemed necessary at any time during my employment.

Signed..... Date.....

Please return to our Occupational Health Advisor in the enclosed envelope marked CONFIDENTIAL.

Note 1

Description of work activities



Examples:

- The majority of the employment within the workplace requires you to be mobile and may include periods of stationary postures, climbing and frequent use of upper limbs.
- You may also have to work in hot or cold environments.
- Carrying and handling boxed items weighing less than 10kg on level ground.
- Operating a fork lift truck.

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