

Health Surveillance

Health surveillance is a process used to detect early signs of work-related ill health amongst workers exposed to certain health risks and to act on the results. It is required when people at work are exposed to, working with or working in environments that contain biological, chemical or physical agents, which have the potential to damage human health.

Benefits of Health Surveillance

Health surveillance provides you with information, which helps you to protect employees from illness caused by being exposed to health risks at work. It enables you to manage these risks effectively by checking:

- How your control measures are working
- Helping to pinpoint where you need to take further steps
- It also provides a valuable opportunity for feedback from employees and a chance to reinforce your health and safety messages to them.

When is Health Surveillance Required?

The starting point is your risk assessment. Through this, you should have found out the health hazards in your workplace, identified who is at risk and taken measures to do something to control the risk. Where risks remain, you will need to take further steps, one of which is to consider health surveillance. But remember that health surveillance is not a substitute for controlling health risks at work.

In particular, employers must carry out health surveillance where any employee is at risk from a substance or process, which may lead to ill-health.

This can include:

- Substances known to cause dermatitis and occupational asthma
- A wide variety of solvents, chemicals, fumes, dusts and biological agents hazardous to health
- Asbestos and lead
- Work in compressed air
- Ionising radiation
- Working in a noisy environment
- Work with vibrating tools or equipment
- Night shift work
- Working in extremes of temperature
- Work in high or low barometric pressure (e.g. diving or working in compressed air).

How is it carried out and who can do it?

Health surveillance involves watching out for early signs of work-related ill health for employees exposed to certain risks. This could include:

- skin checks - looking for skin damage and other signs of dermatitis on the hands that can result from using certain chemicals. These can include cement, solvents, and cleaning agents
- technical checks, such as hearing tests or lung functions tests
- taking a blood test, e.g. for blood lead levels
- giving a urine sample, e.g. to monitor isocyanates absorbed into the body.

Employers, supervisors, team leaders etc. should be specifically trained to identify straightforward signs or symptoms, which may be caused by working with certain substances or processes. Appropriate training by an occupational health doctor or nurse must be provided so that they can recognise those signs or symptoms requiring further assessment and know when and how to refer employees. However, this responsible person must not be expected to diagnose the possible causes of the symptoms.

Where specific symptoms have been identified, the employee concerned must be referred to an occupational health professional, where further testing will be conducted. When the nature of the tests require the expertise of a doctor to interpret the results or an occupational health nurse has identified possible ill-health that requires further investigation, diagnosis or treatment, the employee must be referred for a clinical examination.

In some circumstances biological monitoring/biological effect monitoring will be required. These are tests or checks that are normally carried out by doctors or at least supervised by them and can for example include blood tests or urine tests. However in some cases the actual taking of the samples is straightforward and can be carried out by a suitably trained person.

Information to employees regarding results

Employees must be provided with information on the results of any test or examination. They must also be told about the results of any other monitoring, such as tests for airborne particles or solvents that are undertaken in the workplace.

Employees should be told about:

- the nature and degree of risks to health arising from exposure
- the control measures that have been adopted, and why
- the reasons for using any type of personal protective equipment and clothing, such as respirators or gloves
- monitoring routines and results
- the purpose of health surveillance, and the employees' duty to attend.

An employee should also ask their employer to inform their GP about the results of health surveillance.

Records

You must keep health records of the health surveillance carried out, and some records will need to be kept for 40 years, such as those required under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (COSHH) 2002 and Control of Asbestos Regulations 2006.

Employment Medical Advisory Service (EMAS)

EMAS is staffed by specialist occupational health professionals, both doctors and nurses. They are available to give expert advice on medical matters relating to work to a wide range of organisations and individuals. This includes employers, employees, trade unions, enforcement officers and also other health care professionals. EMAS are concerned with promoting good health by:

- assessing the effect of work on the health of groups or individuals
- advising on the effect of health on an individual's work capacity
- advising on first-aid requirements at work
- supporting health promotion activities.

Overview

Three important points to remember are that:

- you must keep health records of the health surveillance carried out
- people must be competent to undertake health surveillance techniques
- health surveillance will only work if you act on the results - it should be clear how and when people should be referred for further examination and how the results will be used to improve how you manage health risks.

Further Information

Useful publications

HSG61 Health Surveillance at Work, HSE Books - ISBN 07176 1705X £7.00

Publications can be obtained from HSE Books: Telephone: 01787 881165
Online: www.hsebooks.co.uk

Useful Links:

www.hse.gov.uk
www.worksmart.org.uk/health/health_surveillance
www.nhsplus.nhs.uk

Useful Contacts:

The Society of Occupational Medicine
6 St Andrews Place
Regents Park
London
NW1 4LB
Telephone: 020 7486 2641
Fax: 020 7486 0028
Email: admin@som.org.uk
Web: www.som.org.uk

Society of Occupational Health Nursing
The Royal College of Nursing
20 Cavendish Square
London
W1G 0RN
Telephone: 0207 409 3333