

# OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH



Health and Safety Guidance Note



**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).

\*Mental health and Stress is covered in a separate guidance note.

## 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 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.

## HEALTH SCREENING

Health screening, which is repeated on an annual basis (good practice), 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 a potential employee's fitness against which future measurements may be compared);
- Assessing fitness for pension schemes.

The most cost-effective means of undertaking 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 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. You are only permitted to request the applicant to complete the questionnaire if you have already offered employment, with the proviso that should an independent medical adviser deem the job unsuitable due to health reasons then termination may be considered.**

## 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 2002 [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.



## FURTHER GUIDANCE

- HSE website “Health Surveillance”  
[www.hse.gov.uk/health-surveillance/index.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/health-surveillance/index.htm)
- HSE website “Tackling Occupational Disease” [www.hse.gov.uk/aboutus/occupational-disease/](http://www.hse.gov.uk/aboutus/occupational-disease/)
- HSE website “Managing sick leave and return to work”  
[www.hse.gov.uk/sicknessabsence/](http://www.hse.gov.uk/sicknessabsence/)
- Working together to prevent sickness absence becoming job loss [www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/web02.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/web02.pdf)

# HEALTH QUESTIONNAIRE

**Private and confidential** – to be completed by (prospective) employee

Please complete and return this form as directed. Job applicants please note that the completed form will only be processed by the appointed medical advisors if you are recommended for appointment.

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

Address:.....

Telephone number:..... Gender:.....

GP Name & Address:.....

Job Title:.....

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. Please indicate if you have ever suffered from any of the following conditions

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? \_\_\_\_\_

**Questions 14 to 23 are required for new employees only.**

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

Previous Occupations and 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	Vibration (HAVS/WBV)

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

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: \_\_\_\_\_

**The next question is only to be answered by female applicants where the proposed employment might present a risk during pregnancy.**

23. Are you pregnant? Yes  No

If "yes", how far are you into the pregnancy? \_\_\_\_\_

I hereby declare that all the foregoing statements are true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief. I understand that any misrepresentation will invalidate my application and if employed, could lead to my dismissal and/or the withholding of pension benefits.

I understand that I may be required to undergo a medical examination by the business' appointed medical advisors for pre-employment purposes only.

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

This guidance is provided for general information purposes only. This guidance does not constitute, nor should it be construed as constituting, legal or other professional advice. No warranty, whether express or implied, is given in relation to this guidance. We shall not be liable for any technical, typographical or other errors or omissions within this guidance and shall not be responsible for any action or decision taken as a result of you or others using the guidance. You should consult a professional adviser for legal or other advice where appropriate. We assume no responsibility for the availability or content of any linked websites. The inclusion of any link should not be taken as endorsement of any kind by us of the linked website or any association with its owners.

This guidance is provided on the strict understanding that you accept, without limitation, that you retain sole responsibility for compliance with health and safety legislation and regulations, all other legislation and any warranties/conditions attached to your insurance policies. We have not conducted any site visits as part of producing this guidance and we have not, and are not, providing any guidance in relation to your specific set up.

This guidance note contains public sector information published by the Health and Safety Executive and licensed under the Open Government Licence.

[nfumutual.co.uk/rms](https://nfumutual.co.uk/rms)



**NFU Mutual**

NFU Mutual Risk Management Services Limited (No 350057). Registered in England. Registered Office: Tiddington Road, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, CV37 7BJ. A member of the NFU Mutual Group of Companies.

For security and training purposes telephone calls may be recorded and monitored.

VERSION: 2 – 0421