



Under the spotlight: health surveillance

Looking after employee health involves managing both workplace factors that may affect health and health factors that may affect work. Health surveillance is one element of managing workplace factors and in this article [Jo Kitney](#) explains what health surveillance is, what the legislation says and what employers need to do.

What is health surveillance?

Health surveillance is a statutory requirement in health and safety regulations for workers who are potentially exposed to hazards to health. It involves checks on employees to establish whether their health has been affected by specific health hazards such as noise or vibration, ionising radiation, solvents, fumes, dusts and biological agents and for employees who work in compressed air.

Health surveillance is not a substitute for using effective controls to manage health hazards; instead it is used to check that controls to manage health hazards are effective. The type of health surveillance required is determined by risk assessment of the health hazards that employees are exposed to and can include blood samples, lung function and audiometry testing.

Why is health surveillance important?

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) reports that rates of work-related illness have generally reduced over the last decade. However, an estimated 1.1 million people who worked in 2011/12 were suffering from a work-related illness, of which 452,000 were new cases in that year.

Work-related illnesses include skin disease, respiratory disease, hearing loss and vibration disorder, with lung cancer due to silica, diesel engine exhaust and mineral oils the three largest categories of occupational cancer. There are around 13,000 deaths each year from occupational lung disease and cancer caused by work-related disease, primarily due to chemicals and dusts.

Health surveillance is specifically required under health and safety laws, including the:

- Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002
- Control of Vibration at Work Regulations 2005
- Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005.

Where residual risk remains from exposure to particular substances, health surveillance is also required under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

In addition to being a legal requirement, health surveillance serves a number of important purposes in protecting health at work in that it:

- detects ill health at an early stage, so better controls can be introduced to prevent health worsening
- provides data to help employers evaluate health risks
- enables employees to raise concerns about their health and work

- highlights lapses in workplace control measures and provides feedback to the risk assessment
- reinforces training and education of employees for managing health hazards at work.

As such, health surveillance directly contributes to protecting employees from health hazards at work and reduces the economic costs associated with work-related ill health to individuals, companies and society.

How is health surveillance determined?

Risk assessments establish the health hazards associated with work, identifying who may be exposed and the ill health that may occur, together with what surveillance is required to assess whether health is being adversely affected by work. The HSE's health surveillance cycle at www.hse.gov.uk provides a good basis for determining and providing for health surveillance at work.

A risk assessment is the starting point for determining whether health surveillance is required — this may be as part of a wider health and safety risk register or limited to health hazards at work. It is important to involve employees (or their representatives) in establishing a health surveillance programme so that the purpose of the programme can be explained and workers' involvement gained.

Where health surveillance is required, it is useful to put in place a health surveillance register that lists what health surveillance is required, the workers who require surveillance, the frequency of monitoring and the provider for the surveillance. This establishes the basis for the health surveillance programme, which is particularly useful where a common standard for surveillance is required across an organisation.

Providing health surveillance

Health surveillance is an important part of an organisation's health and safety management system and must follow an industry approved approach. Depending on the health surveillance required this may involve an appointed doctor, occupational doctor or nurse or occupational health technician, or an employee periodically checking their own health and reporting concerns where needed. Guidance may need to be sought from an occupational physician or nurse to establish the programme.

It is important the right type of health surveillance is undertaken at the right time. Health surveillance is undertaken before exposure to the health hazard to create a baseline for the employee and then at defined intervals during exposure. These intervals are defined by law or determined through risk assessment. It is also beneficial to carry out health surveillance when exposure ceases (ie the activity stops, the worker transfers or leaves employment), so that a final record of his or her health status is held.

Where a provider is to be used to undertake the health surveillance, the HSE has a useful checklist for purchasing health surveillance provision. This checklist can be used before or during the first meeting with a potential provider.

Dealing with test results

Employees must be informed of the results of health surveillance and appropriate advice and information given, particularly where results may be outside the normal ranges. Information must be provided sensitively as any such result is likely to be of concern to an employee.

Management must also be informed of the overall results (without breaching confidentiality) so that these can be compared for work groups and work areas (ie workers with similar exposure) and action taken where needed to manage results outside the normal range.

Where an employee (or group of employees) has abnormal test results or where potential or actual health effects from the hazard are identified, the employee must be referred for a further assessment, such as to an occupational physician for advice and further examination. This further assessment should determine if there are concerns and what action may need to be taken, such as medical treatment, removal from work (or removal from working with the health hazard).

Within the workplace, health surveillance results must also be used to review control measures for health hazards and to identify what is working well and where additional control measures may be required. Risk assessments may need to be updated and the hierarchy of control used to establish the best way of managing health hazards, for example substituting a substance hazardous to health, putting in place engineering controls, restricting exposure and improving the use of personal protective equipment.

Record keeping and confidentiality

Details of health surveillance findings, including test results, must be recorded within an employee's health record. Records must be appropriately dated and signed and records retained in accordance with health and safety legislation and maintained in accordance with the Data Protection Act and, where physicians and nurses are involved, in accordance with their respective regulating body (ie the Nursing and Midwifery Council and General Medical Council).

Further information

- HSE checklist when purchasing health surveillance provision
- HSE health surveillance cycle
- HSE Annual Statistics Report for Great Britain 2012/13
- HSE work-related ill health and occupational disease statistics

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