Health Surveillance Guidance

SPECTRA

What is Workplace Health Surveillance?

Health surveillance is the identification of workplace risks and the subsequent monitoring of employees' health to ensure their safety and wellbeing.

Some industries have specific hazards where workers could be exposed to radiation, asbestos or lead and therefore have statutory requirements to provide health surveillance for those employees affected. However, industries such as manufacturing, engineering or transport have many common hazards that would also require a health surveillance program for the employees exposed to these hazards.

A healthy workforce is generally happier and more productive, so a health surveillance program helps to reduce staff turn-over rates and the number of sick-days taken by employees. The company may also benefit from an enhanced image as one who looks after their employees. This will assist in not just maintaining staff but attracting new talent.

A health surveillance program demonstrates compliance with regulations such as CoSHH, Control of Noise, Control of Asbestos, Control of Vibration etc.

Regular health checks may also detect more serious issues unrelated to the employee's activities. For example, a thorough eye test may show signs of a brain tumour, before any symptoms are evident

Health Surveillance Guidance

SPECTRA

Regular physical monitoring of employees by a health professional may indicate an early detection of a health problem that is easier to treat and therefore lead to a quicker resolution of the problem which is better for the employee. It may also result in a reduction of health care costs for the employee (through less expensive medication) and the company (less absenteeism, increased production, potential reduction of insurance premiums). Providing such a program also demonstrates a company's commitment to the health and well-being of the employees who will have a sense of being cared for and valued.

What does implementing a Health surveillance program entail?

Employers can start by obtaining information directly from the employee using a medical questionnaire which will identify any pre-existing conditions such as diabetes, asthma, epilepsy etc. Separate questionnaires depending on the tasks the employee will be involved in will also be useful (Hand/Arm Vibration self-assessment, Noise Self-assessment, Display Screen Self-Assessment).

Organisations may insist on all new starters undergoing a full medical or simply focus on specific hazards such as audiometry tests.

In either case, baseline results would be obtained to identify any known difficulties or early onsets of illness or disability which could be considered when assigning tasks to the employee.

The data could also protect the company from frivolous negligence claims. For example, an employee claiming compensation for hearing loss after a few months of working in a noisy environment. If the company has correctly risk-assessed the activity, provided adequate control measures, including signage and provision of hearing protection as well as a baseline audiometric report showing pre-existing hearing loss, then the company will be in a much stronger position to defend the claim.

Risk assessment.

The process must include the identification and management of workplace hazards your employees are exposed to.

This must be achieved by conducting a thorough risk assessment for each activity and assessing the potential exposure to hazards (E.g., mechanical, thermal, environmental, electrical, hydraulic, chemicals, biological, ergonomic, psychosocial).

The assessment must identify who can be harmed and if the individual has any pre-existing conditions that make them more vulnerable to the hazards of the activity or process.

Health Surveillance Guidance

SPECTRA

Gather Information

Substances

CoSHH regulations (reg 6) require a suitable and sufficient risk assessment to be developed for any substance that has a potential to cause harm. The list is varied but typical examples are paints, solvents, dusts, fumes, asbestos, compressed gases etc.

The manufacturers' Safety Data sheets provide most of the information required in the CoSHH risk assessment and they are easily available via the manufacturers' or retailers' websites. A SDS must be obtained for every substance used. It is important that they are filed and made available to the workers affected. Many companies consider the SDS fulfils the requirement for the risk assessment but that is incorrect.

Health surveillance includes the systematic monitoring of the individual to ensure that they are not being exposed to unsafe levels of a substance.

Hand/Arm Vibration.

Operatives in the construction, engineering and manufacturing sectors often use power tools that vibrate. E.g. drills, breakers, grinders, compacters etc., which transmit the vibration to the upper limbs and sometimes the body of the worker.

Unsafe exposure levels can cause upper limb disorders such as Vibration White finger, Carpel tunnel injury or Paraesthesia (an unpleasant burning or prickling sensation).

Workers exposed to HAV should be provided with a HAV self-assessment, the results of which should be filed and considered when risk assessing the activity for the individual.
If HAV is identified as a hazard, then it must be recorded in the risk assessment. Other than the usual control measures provided, such as ensuring the equipment is in good condition, the worker is warm, or providing PPE etc. There should be data showing the duration of exposure and the vibration magnitude of the tool is considered to produce a calculation that is within the safe limits of use.

The vibration data for a tool or appliance can easily be obtained from the manufacturer. The duration or 'trigger time' must be established by the competent person conducting the risk assessment. These two numbers are entered onto the HSE HAV calculator which will generate a points score. If the score exceeds safe levels, then other control measures must be implemented, such as rotation of the task with other workers or setting a maximum duration time which falls below the safe limits.

Noise

Similar to HAV above, many appliances that vibrate tend to also produce unsafe levels of noise which can harm workers exposed to the hazard. Industrial processes such as glass bottling, textile manufacturing, steel fabrication require robust engineering control measures other than just providing Personal Protective Equipment.

The are many forms of noise-induced hearing loss and most of them are irreversible so it is important that health surveillance programs are implemented to monitor the individuals to ensure their hearing loss is due only to the ageing process and not exacerbated by their work activities.

The approach to risk assessment is similar to HAV with regards to tools or equipment. Noise data obtained from the manufacturer and the trigger times for the activity are entered onto the HSE Noise calculator. The score is then considered to identify further controls if necessary.

Noisy manufacturing processes which produce unsafe levels of ambient sound must be assessed using appropriate sound recording equipment such as a sound level meter which provides readings (in decibels) to use in calculations. Larger companies may engage specialist contractors to provide this service.

Health Surveillance Guidance

SPECTRA

Display Screen Equipment.

The prevalence of computers and the internet as an almost infinite source of information has resulted in most workers using keyboards and monitors as their main activity of work. Excessive use of DSE equipment can lead to many problems such as degradation of eyesight, sensory loss in upper limbs or neck, stress, or carpal tunnel syndrome. Workers must be made aware of the hazards of using DSE.
They should be provided with self-assessment to identify any existing issues and guidance on how to set up their environment, take regular breaks, and have regular checks on their eyesight.

Implementing a Health surveillance program.

Large companies may have their own medical centres with qualified medical personnel, but most small to medium organisations may simply engage the services of an Occupational Health service provider to assess their staff (or a section of staff engaged in more hazardous activities). Some may simply focus on a particularly prevalent hazard (such as noise) and pay for audiometry testing for affected staff.

Health Surveillance Guidance

SPECTRA

Spectra can advise you in regards to what Health Surveillance your business requires and provide documents to help monitor employees health.

If you would like to find out more about our services or book a Free H&S / HR Review
Please contact Dave on 0161 388 5130 or enquiries@thespectragroup.co.uk