

Occupational health

A guide for workers
and their representatives



*Helping you to be in the best of health
at work and for life*

Work-related ill health

Each year as many as 1.3 million British workers report a condition they believe to be caused by work. This places significant burdens on affected workers and their families.

Occupational health and the law

The Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require employers to appoint a competent person or persons to help them meet their legal duties for health and safety, taking into account the size of the undertaking and the risks involved. While a health professional is not always needed employers still need to call on an appropriately qualified doctor or nurse to deal with any work-related health problems. Large employers may employ a competent occupational health professional to be in charge of their occupational health programme.

The Society of Occupational Medicine

We are concerned with:

- the protection of the health of people in the workplace
- the prevention of occupational injuries and disease
- related environmental issues

Occupational health services

Occupational health services contribute to the effective management of the health of workers and workplaces, supporting employers to meet their legal responsibilities to:

- Provide healthy workplaces and work
- Protect people from developing work-related ill health
- Provide health surveillance
- Adjust work for people with health problems or disabilities.

Occupational health staff

Occupational health doctors and nurses are the suitably qualified persons to enquire about symptoms, inspect or examine employees. Larger teams may include physiotherapists to help with musculoskeletal problems, counsellors to help with stress at work and occupational health technicians to perform lung function tests and hearing tests.

Confidentiality

Occupational health nurses and doctors have a professional duty to protect patient confidentiality; to inform you how your health information is recorded and used and of your right of access to your personal information. They will not disclose any information without the employee's consent; unless someone may be at risk of serious harm and in line with the law.

The value of occupational health to you

Occupational health may start to help assure your health and safety even before you start work. Depending on the work you are hired to do you may be required to have a **post-offer health assessment** to make sure that any health condition or disability does not place you or others at risk (e.g. professional drivers); or that adjustments are made to your work or the workplace to help you work safely and effectively.

If you have a health problem that you think affects your ability to work or that may have been caused or aggravated by work occupational health can perform an **assessment of your health and your workplace** and offer **expert, impartial and confidential advice and support**.

If you are off sick and only with your consent occupational health can work with you, your manager and your GP or hospital consultant to ensure that you make a **safe and healthy return to work** and that any temporary or permanent adjustments are made e.g. to your working hours or any arduous duties or hazardous exposures.

If you work with any hazardous materials then you may be offered a baseline health assessment on commencing employment as the start of regular **health surveillance** performed while you are exposed to a hazard at work. By detecting any changes at an early stage and while they are only minor occupational health may be able to prevent the problem getting worse or noticeable to you.

If you are exposed to infectious diseases at work or because of business travel occupational health will provide or arrange **immunizations and preventive medicines**.

It is also likely that occupational health will run **health promotion** activities to help you take the measures to keep yourself healthy at work and for your own benefit.

CASE STUDY 1

Phil's story

Phil works in the finance department and spends a lot of the day at a computer screen looking at large spreadsheets. He developed severely impaired vision in both eyes and was having difficulty with work. He told his manager who referred him to occupational health. After speaking to occupational health they arranged to get a report from his specialist to understand his condition better. They saw Phil again after receiving the report and assessed his workstation with him. Occupational health arranged for his department to provide a large separate computer screen, special software, a telephone with large numbers and a portable video magnifier. He was able to succeed in his job and get good annual appraisals and salary increases for his work.

Getting help

Occupational health service

First of all find out if your employer provides access to an in-house or quality assured external occupational health service and contact them. Whether or not you have access to occupational health you should consider speaking to:

Your line manager – your employer is responsible for your health, safety and welfare at work.

Your health and safety representative – who is legally empowered to investigate complaints by any employee they represent relating to that employee's health, safety or welfare at work.

If you do not have access to occupational health further support is available from:

Fit for Work – which offers free and confidential work-related health advice. Anyone looking for help with issues around health and work can browse online resources, chat online to a specialist advisor, email a question or call the free advice line.

fitforwork.org/

0800 032 6235

This information guide is supported by the TUC.



CASE STUDY 2

Changing shift patterns

Over the last year several workers in a factory had consulted their occupational health unit for advice about poor sleep. Occupational health raised this with the production manager and arranged to attend a departmental safety meeting; where it was also noted that the accident rate had increased. Occupational health worked with the department manager and the health and safety representative to survey workers and to run focus groups to design a new shift pattern which suited most people. Three months after the new shift rota was introduced sleep disturbances were fewer and less severe; and the accident rate had improved.