

A guide to Health Surveillance

What is health surveillance?

Health Surveillance is widely used throughout industry to help employers to control any health risks that their employees may be exposed to whilst they are at work.

Organisations have a duty to monitor the health of their employees when a risk assessment identifies that there is a specific known risk to their health or well-being; for example carrying out hearing tests on employees who work in noisy environments.

Why do I need it?

Many of the organisation's employees are requested to participate in the health surveillance programme, however not all employees will have the same tests. Employees, or groups of employees, have been assessed and the tests they will undergo are appropriate to the risks they may be exposed to whilst they are at work.

The health surveillance programme may identify a specific risk to your health, which may result in special precautionary measures being taken, e.g. individually made ear-plugs, to reduce the risk to you personally, as much as possible.

What will happen at the appointment?

It is very much like a normal medical examination and will depend upon the possible risks to your health governed by your job role. Much of the surveillance is carried out by asking you a series of specific questions about your health.

Most of the other tests will depend on the type of job you do. The tests are carried out by highly trained technicians and occupational health advisers and you will have the opportunity to ask them questions.

Preparation

If you normally wear glasses or a hearing aid please bring these with you.

Fork lift truck and mobile plant operators may be asked to provide a urine sample (a sample pot will be provided). This is to look for conditions that may affect your health such as diabetes. Please therefore bear this in mind just before your appointment.

What happens to the results?

The results of health surveillance are confidential just the same as medical records that are kept by your own doctor (GP) or your Consultant/Specialist if you are seeing one. These medical records cannot be accessed by anyone else without your written consent.

However health surveillance data is slightly different. Health Management will collect and store the information and will treat it as confidential medical information. However, if the surveillance picks up any abnormalities or possible problems, which are work related, then your results will be referred to the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) who will consider them and then decide whether reference should be made to your own doctor (GP) or whether you should be referred directly to a consultant/specialist (at the organisation's expense).

If there is a need for your GP to be contacted, then Health Management will ask you to complete a medical consent form to be sent by the CMO to your GP. The CMO will then have access to your medical records and discuss the problem with your GP.

If you are referred directly to a consultant/specialist, then your consent will be obtained before any information is released to the organisation.

Concerns may be raised as a consequence of your initial health surveillance and the CMO will often need to take instruction from the HR or H&S Manager to further fully investigate the case to come to a formal diagnosis.

The organisation will be advised of any special measures that may be required to further protect your health and well being.

The company also advises you not to discuss your results with any of your colleagues, as to do so may result in a loss of confidentiality.

Should any non-work related conditions be detected e.g. high blood pressure or diabetes, which is unlikely to affect your ability to work, then you will normally be given a letter to take to your GP.

Could my job be affected?

The honest answer to this question is yes it could. However it must be stressed that this is extremely unusual. The whole idea of health surveillance is to identify any health problems or potential problems as early as possible and take the necessary remedial actions accordingly. In the vast majority of cases this means that special or additional precautions are advised and not the loss of a person's job.

This would only be the case where there was an unacceptable risk to your health that could only be addressed by removing you completely from your existing job. An example of this might be if you regularly used vibrating tools as part of your job and you developed or started to develop hand arm vibration syndrome. If the continued use of vibrating tools was likely to make your condition worse and the medical advice was that you should no longer use vibrating tools etc, then this may affect your suitability for that job.

However in such extreme cases every effort would be made to find you alternative employment within the company.

Do I have to take part?

Under current safety legislation where a risk assessment shows that your work or working environment could have an adverse effect on your health, then the company has a duty to provide you with health surveillance. Under the same legislation you as an employee also have a duty to co-operate with the company and take part in the health surveillance provided. The programme is free of charge to you and therefore the company strongly advises everybody to take part. However the company has no wish to become confrontational with anybody and if you do not wish to co-operate then the organisation will respect your wishes.

However if you choose not to take part in the health surveillance programme then your employer will need to reach their own view as to whether they are able to accommodate you in your role in those circumstances

You should also be aware that refusal may also affect your chances of making a successful compensation claim in the future, if you develop a health problem that could have been picked up by the surveillance programme.

Finally, if you decide not to take part then you may be asked to sign a disclaimer document saying that you have chosen not to take part and that you fully understand the possible consequences.