Health Surveillance/Fitness for Work Medicals

Introduction

The term "Health Surveillance" is often used indiscriminately and is easily confused with other occupational health (OH) activities, including health screening and fitness-for-work assessments.

*Health Surveillance* refers to specific circumstances where the health assessment of an employee is legally required in relation to health risks encountered in the workplace. *Health Surveillance* is concerned with systematic measures applied by an employer to detect early signs of work-related ill health in employees exposed to certain health risks.

Background

Health Surveillance is defined in two important pieces of Health and Safety legislation: the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (MHSW 1999) and the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH 2002). Schedule 11 of COSHH defines exposures to substances that require Health Surveillance.

When is Health Surveillance Required?

The key to determining when Health Surveillance is required is the Risk Assessment. Through the Risk Assessment the employer should have determined the health hazards in the workplace, identified who is at risk and taken measures to control the risk. Where risks remain, the employer will need to take further steps, one of which is to consider whether Health Surveillance is necessary. But, it is important to remember that Health Surveillance must not be a substitute for controlling health risks at work: for example, a well-organised programme of hearing testing will not stop employees developing noise-induced deafness from uncontrolled exposure to noise at work.

Employers should ask themselves the following questions:

1. Is there a hazard to health?
2. Is there a significant risk of disease or adverse health effects occurring under the circumstances of exposure?
3. Is there a requirement for Health Surveillance under specific Health and Safety regulations; such as noise and vibration regulations?
4. Is there a requirement for Health Surveillance under more general Health and Safety regulations such as MHSWA and COSHH?

It must be made clear by the employer that attendance for *Health Surveillance* is expected; potentially a contractual obligation. Employers must also carefully consider the implications to an employee who is considered unfit following an assessment.
Finally, it is emphasised that employees are required to attend for Health Surveillance procedures. They need to give their consent for most Health Surveillance procedures and be sure that medical information is treated in confidence. They need to understand the implications if they refuse to attend, or consent to Health Surveillance. Employees also have a right of access to their own health record.

Common examples of health surveillance

- Skin Surveillance: examination by responsible person of the skin of hands of employees exposed to skin sensitising or irritant chemicals.
- Respiratory Surveillance: measurement of lung function in employees exposed to substances known to cause occupational asthma or rhinitis: e.g. employees exposed to flour dust, Silica, isocyanates, glutaraldehyde.
- Hearing Surveillance: examination of ears and hearing of employees exposed to noise.
- HAVS Surveillance: examination of employees exposed to hand-transmitted vibration.
- Testing employees for substances, or effects, caused by exposures in the workplace. This is known as biological or biological effect monitoring: and takes the form of a urine or blood test depending on what the employee is exposed to.

Who Undertakes Health Surveillance?

Health Surveillance undertaken by Optima Health is completed by trained Occupational Health Technicians who are supported by Nurses.

At a basic level Health Surveillance can involve employees themselves checking for signs of skin rashes or symptoms; provided they have been carefully instructed in knowing what to look out for, and that the self-reporting is linked to a wider Health Surveillance Programme.

In some circumstances trained supervisors (responsible person) can undertake Health Surveillance; for example, checking employees’ skin for rashes and inflammation, or asking questions about hand symptoms where work involves exposure to hand-transmitted vibration.

For more complicated assessments, an occupational health adviser (OHA) can ask about symptoms or carry out an examination. For certain hazards, clinical examinations may need to be carried out by a physician (medical examination), preferably one trained in occupational medicine.

Maintaining Records of Health Surveillance

Employers must

Employees need to understand the purposes of Health Surveillance and also be reassured that their medical information will be treated in confidence. They must be given information, instruction and training on health risks. It is recommended that employees be given this instruction before surveillance begins. This could effectively involve seminars or workshops, where an experienced occupational health professional delivers information face-to-face to the workforce.

Employees must also understand their role and responsibilities in the wider Health Surveillance Programme; in particular they should understand their responsibilities to report any ill health effects that may be linked to work, and any that might occur between scheduled health assessments.
Fitness for Work assessments

You may be asked to attend for a medical assessment in relation to fitness for work. This is usually because an employee undertakes safety critical work such as driving, working at heights, confined space working and work involving Breathing Apparatus as examples. This assessment will involve the following:

- Checking of blood pressure,
- Height, weight, waist circumference and body mass index
- Vision test
- Urine test (testing for protein, blood and glucose)
- Musculoskeletal assessment
- Spirometry (Lung function test) if exposed to respiratory hazards in the safety critical role or use Breathing apparatus
- Audiometry (hearing test) if working in confined spaces and also exposed to high noise levels within safety critical role.

At a fitness for work medical, it may be necessary to temporarily restrict an employee from the safety critical elements of their role until further information is gathered by the Occupational health team if a medical condition is discovered or if tests results are outside of the medical protocols. The employee and Manager will be kept informed at each stage if this occurs and informed as to what the next steps will be.

A certificate of fitness will be issued by Optima Health to the employee’s Manager or HR for the employee’s records.