

Occupational health

A guide for line managers
and HR professionals



Occupational health enhances employee health, workforce productivity, business performance and the economy

Occupational health and the law

The Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require employers to appoint a competent person(s) 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 manage their occupational health programme, to advise and to help manage health risks.

In recent years HSE has successfully prosecuted more than 40 directors each year, with some being convicted of corporate manslaughter and receiving custodial sentences.

Key facts

In the UK sickness absence

- Runs at 2 to 3%
- Costs businesses £28.8 billion/year
- Costs around £554/employee
- Accounts for 2 to 16% of payroll

Work-related ill health

- Affects 1.3 million British workers
- Loses ~ 26 million working days/year
- Costs Britain over £9 billion/year at an average £17,600/case

Further information

Occupational health: the value proposition. Society of Occupational Medicine. London 2017. www.som.org.uk

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's health at work
- Provide health surveillance
- Adjust work for people with health problems or disabilities.

Occupational health services support employers to develop a healthy culture and contribute to an organisation's health and performance.

Occupational health involvement is most commonly ranked among organisations' most effective methods for managing long-term sickness absence.

Occupational health staff

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

Confidentiality

Occupational health professionals have a legal duty of care to the employer and a professional duty of care for patients. They will not disclose personal health information without consent; unless there is a risk of serious harm and in line with the law.

What occupational health offers managers and HR professionals

Occupational health services work with employers to protect and enhance employee health, which is associated with improved workforce productivity

and organisational performance. Services offered depend on the type of organisation and the hazards and risk; hence the examples below are illustrative.

Organisation support	Value
Health risk assessment	Statutory and employer health surveillance programmes implemented properly to assure employee health
Health needs assessment	Health programmes are designed and resourced to address the main lifestyle health risks; top causes of sickness absence, etc.
Policy development	Policies, practices and cultures that maintain and promote employee health and compliance with relevant health and safety legislation
Change management	Change in shift patterns; the introduction of new chemicals, etc. are managed to protect health and business continuity
Business continuity planning	Ensure contingency plans are in place to deal with health risks e.g. emergency medical response for disasters, pandemics, etc. to protect employees and business operations

Employee support	Value
Health assessment	Workers can perform their job safely considering any health issues or disabilities they may have People with a disability or a health condition are enabled to work through suitable work and / or workplace adjustments
Education and training	Employees understand health hazards and risks and personal measures to protect their health
Health surveillance	Early identification of health changes to ensure the cause is investigated and the workplace improved to prevent disease and permanent ill health
Immunization and travel medicines	At risk employees are better protected against infectious diseases
Consultation	Employees are supported to address work-related health concerns e.g. stress at work or to cope with work when they have stresses outside of work
Case management	Earliest return to work by offering changes to the job and /or work schedule Ill health retirement assessed properly against Pension Fund criteria
Health promotion	Employees who are in optimal health through leading healthier lifestyles

Getting help

Your occupational health service – when you have one seek to understand the scope of services before you need their support.

If you do not have access to an occupational health service or professional then the following may help:

To find an occupational health doctor or nurse:

Society of Occupational Medicine – free directory of occupational health and medicine professionals – including qualifications, experience and contact details.

<https://www.som.org.uk/find-oh>

Health & Safety Executive – list of ‘appointed doctors’ who can perform statutory medical examinations for asbestos, lead, ionising radiations, etc.

www.hse.gov.uk/doctors/

To find an occupational health service:

SEQOHS – list of accredited occupational health services which have been independently audited and which meet the SEQOHS standards.

www.seqohs.org

For support for an employee who has been off sick for at least four weeks:

Fit for Work – a line of support for GPs, employers and employees to help those who are in work with health conditions or off sick.

<http://fitforwork.org/employer/>

“With responsibility for people’s health and wellbeing increasingly falling on employers, occupational health can play a vital role in supporting them to put in place an effective framework. The valuable contribution that occupational health professionals can make to an organisation can be far wider than is often realised – not only by providing effective rehabilitation and return to work strategies when people are already ill but giving expert advice and introducing initiatives to help prevent ill health in the first place. Employers that invest in this area are likely to more than reap the benefits in terms of better health outcomes for staff but also from their increased engagement and loyalty.”

Chartered Institute of Personnel
Development