Health assessments -
A guide for managers on assessment content

Health Management Ltd take a risk-based approach to delivering health assessments, and the content of assessments will depend upon individual exposures, and the purpose of the assessments.

Health assessments are usually offered for one or more of the following reasons

Health surveillance	To ensure health is not being affected by exposure to specific hazards at work. There are a variety of hazards which may require health surveillance, but the most common are exposure to noise, respiratory hazards, skin hazards, and hand-arm vibration.
Fitness for work	To ensure there are no current health issues which may prevent the employee from, or put them at increased risk of, undertaking the requirements of the role. This is usually appropriate where the role involves potential risk, such as driving, working at heights, undertaking safety critical work, confined space work, using breathing apparatus, etc.
Wellbeing	Some employers may offer the option of undertaking additional assessments for the employees own personal benefit. These are not required as a result of occupational exposures, but can help identify early onset of health concerns, and provide feedback on current health to help maintain a fit & healthy lifestyle.

Depending upon the role and services requested, some assessment items may be included for one or more of the above reasons, based on our understanding of the role requirements. If an employee feels any of the assessment items are not appropriate, or does not wish to undertake any particular assessment, this should be discussed in conjunction with their role. It should be kept in mind that if an employee is required to undertake health surveillance because of specific exposures, failure to undergo appropriate surveillance may mean they can no longer be exposed, which in turn may have a bearing upon their ability to fulfil the requirements of their role. You should discuss with HR and your H&S representative if an employee refuses to undergo mandatory surveillance.

The following is a list of the assessment items that may be offered, a brief explanation of the assessment, and the rationale behind why the assessment is recommended. Note that not all assessments will be applicable to everyone attending.

Audiometry

Assessment consists of a short questionnaire, followed by a hearing test during which a series of quiet tones are presented to each ear and you are asked to identify each time you hear one.

Audiometry surveillance is required for employees who work in noisy environments. Regular exposure to loud noise is known to damage hearing over prolonged periods. Hearing protection, if worn correctly, should prevent this from occurring, however health surveillance will identify any noise-related changes to your hearing at an early stage, allowing corrective action to be taken long before the damage becomes noticeable to you.

Certain jobs require minimum hearing levels to ensure you can hear voices and localise sounds, particularly if driving or working in safety critical areas. In these cases a simple hearing test will identify if there may be any difficulties. If the assessment identifies any deficiency, it would generally be necessary to undertake a functional assessment within the workplace to determine whether this does actually have any impact on your ability to undertake your role safely, as this needs to be determined in 'real world' conditions.

Lung function

A short questionnaire is completed, followed by a spirometry test. Spirometry requires you to inhale as much as possible then perform a hard sustained blow through a mouthpiece. The test is repeated to ensure maximal values are obtained, and the results allow lung volumes and, more importantly, airway function to be measured.

Prior to undertaking spirometry, a blood pleasure measurement is usually undertaken as very high blood pressure (hypertension) can be a contraindication to undertaking spirometry.

Working with respiratory irritants can cause reduced lung function and associated hay-fever like symptoms. Some substances are known to be respiratory sensitisers; effects are usually seen early in employment, however you can work with these for many years with no ill-effects, and sensitisation can still occur subsequently, following which even small exposures may bring on severe respiratory reaction, and in severe cases, significant debility. Periodic respiratory surveillance looks for indications that you may be experiencing early stage reactions, and allows time for further investigations to be completed to avoid severe conditions developing.

Some occupations may also require a normal lung function in order to undertake certain physically demanding tasks, or use specialised equipment such as breathing apparatus.

Skin assessment

A short questionnaire is completed, along with a brief examination of exposed areas of skin, or any areas you identify as a cause of concern.

Working with skin irritants and sensitisers can cause onset of occupational dermatitis, with symptoms ranging from mild to severe. Because skin irritations can occur quickly following exposure, you should raise any concerns with your line manager or supervisor as soon as they occur. Supporting this, the skin assessment allows us to address any concerns you may have, emphasise the need for reporting any concerns, and give additional advice where appropriate.

Certain occupations, such as those involving food handling, may require good hand hygiene in order to undertake the work.

Hand-Arm Vibration (HAV) assessments

Hand-Arm Vibration Syndrome (HAVS) is assessed using a tiered assessment process. Tier 2 is a short questionnaire based assessment which identifies if more thorough investigation is needed. Tier 3 and involves a longer face assessment with a more detailed questionnaire, along with assessments of manual functions such as dexterity and grip strength. Tier 2 is usually completed annually. Tier 3 may be required following possible symptoms identified during Tier 2, and otherwise is required every third year. You should be advised prior to attending whether you will be undertaking a Tier 2 or Tier 3 assessment.

Although it is normal to experiencing apparent symptoms for a short time immediately after using vibrating tools, working with vibration for prolonged periods can cause permanent physiological changes to the blood supply and nerves within the hands, causing associated symptoms such as tingling and numbness. If unchecked, HAVS can progress to become a debilitating condition. Risk is reduced by limiting exposure and simple steps such as reducing smoking and keeping hands warm, however health surveillance is required to ensure any developing symptoms are identified early, and corrective steps taken to prevent the condition progressing.

Height / Weight / BMI

Height and weight is measured after removing shoes and heavy outdoor clothing, and heavy objects in pockets. Body Mass Index (BMI) is a calculation based upon your height and weight readings.

BMI may be one of several factors taken into account as part of your overall fitness level for certain physically demanding roles, as it may restrict function in extreme cases. BMI alone is not a precise indicator however so would not be considered in isolation.

Certain roles may also have physical limitation to height and weight limits, such as minimum/maximum height limits to use of certain equipment, or maximum weight limits of hoists or fall arrest equipment.

Increased BMI is a recognised risk factor in developing many conditions such as cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal conditions and diabetes. As part of a wellbeing assessment, it allows appropriate advice to be given in order to help you avoid health issues developing in later life.

Blood pressure

A cuff is placed around the upper arm and inflated to a sufficient pressure, then reduced slowly to measure systolic (heartbeat) and diastolic (heart relaxed) blood pressures.

Raised blood pressure (hypertension) does not usually present any symptoms but increases the risk of developing other health conditions. In extreme cases, it can put you at risk of unexpected and sudden cardiovascular events such as stroke or heart attack. Employees with undiagnosed or poorly controlled hypertension may be advised to avoid certain aspects of work until the condition is seen to be stable. Employees with stable, well controlled hypertension would not usually present a concern.

High blood pressure does not cause symptoms, and many people are unaware they have it, however if it goes undiagnosed, the continuous increased pressure it causes within the vessels and organs of the body can cause malfunction in other organs, including increasing the risk of heart attack or stroke. Once identified it is easy to control, and unless you visit your GP regularly, a routine health check such as this is often the first indicator that blood pressure may be elevated.

Glucose

Glucose can be measured in two different ways. Preferentially, a small finger-tip blood sample is collected via a sterile pin-prick, and collected in capillary tube. The sample is then analysed by a portable device and a result available within one minute. It is not necessary to fast prior to the blood sample, although the results may be elevated by food intake within 90 minutes of testing.

Alternatively, a urine sample can be analysed to ascertain glucose levels. Although this does not give as much information as a finger-tip blood sample, it satisfies the requirements of the assessment.

If you are offered a blood glucose test but prefer to provide a urine sample instead, just let us know during the assessment.

Glucose levels are assessed in order to determine whether you may have undiagnosed diabetes, or if you have the condition, whether it is adequately controlled. From an occupational health perspective, uncontrolled or undiagnosed diabetes can lead to impaired levels of consciousness which, if occurring whilst undertaking safety critical work, could have serious consequences. Having diabetes won't usually stop you from undertaking your normal work, as long as the condition is being effectively managed and your blood sugar levels are adequately controlled.

Onset of diabetes often occurs later in life and, if undiagnosed, can lead to serious health complications. You are at increased risk of developing the condition if close family members also have diabetes. This simple test will identify if your blood sugar levels are increasing, allowing for early diagnosis and referral on for appropriate management through your GP.

Vision test

Depending on the requirements of your role, and assessment of your far and near acuity (with and without corrective lenses if used) and colour vision may be undertaken. Visual acuity is tested simply by reading characters of varying sizes at a pre-determined distance. Visual field checks may also be requested.

Many roles require far vision to be at an acceptable level, particularly those involving driving or safety critical work. Employees unable to achieve the required visual standards may be advised to refrain from certain aspects of their work until they have appropriate corrective lenses available.

Some jobs may also require adequate near vision, or normal colour perception.

A screening vision test can help DSE users decided whether to request a full optician assessment, however it does not replace the entitlement under the DSE Regs to request further assessment, usually funded by a voucher scheme or similar.

Many drivers are unaware that without corrective lenses they may be below the minimum DVLA standards for driving, or that existing spectacles may no longer be adequate. In the event of an accident, they could find themselves uninsured as a consequence. A simple vision check can highlight if there are any concerns.

Musculoskeletal assessment

This is assessed by means of a health questionnaire, and in some cases demonstration of basic mobility functions such as balance, neck rotation, full squat etc.

Impaired musculoskeletal function may cause difficulties undertaking physically demanding or manual handling roles, or work may delay the healing process following injury. Other roles such as driving may have different musculoskeletal requirements focussed on the upper body, such as neck rotation to ensure adequate visibility can be maintained.

Exercise (step) test

An exercise test is conducted using a standard step height, and a recorded metronome beat. You are asked to step onto and off the step at a rhythm set by the recording for a short period of time, and your heart rate is monitored continuously via a monitor placed around your chest. At set intervals, the step rhythm increases, so demanding more effort. This continues until your heart rate reaches a pre-determined level, or until you begin to feel tired. The amount of work you were able to achieve before this point is calculated to determine a degree of fitness. The test only takes 5-10 minutes to complete, and you can choose to stop at any time. It does require some effort however, and you are advised to were comfortable clothing.

The exercise test is a good way at determining your bodies ability to undertake increased workloads. This can be important to establish if your work involves particularly physical work in safety critical environments, such as the use of full breathing apparatus in hazardous environments, to ensure you are not exposed to occupational hazards which present unacceptable risk. Most roles require just a normal level of fitness; we do not expect you to be an athlete!

Fitness levels are a good way of benchmarking your current level of fitness, and can help motivate you if you are looking to take steps to improve your fitness level. Increased fitness can help you feel well in yourself, and regular exercise is know to reduce stress and fatigue.

Cholesterol test

A small finger-tip blood sample is collected via a sterile pin-prick, and collected in capillary tube. The sample is then analysed by a portable device and a result available within one minute. It is not necessary to fast prior to the blood sample. If you are having your blood glucose checked as well, this can be tested from the same sample.

Avoiding high cholesterol levels is one of several important factors in reducing your risk of developing cardiovascular problems such as heart attack or stroke. There are actually two forms of cholesterol: HDL or ‘bad’ cholesterol, and LDL or ‘good’ cholesterol. Although it is important to keep your cholesterol level low, it is actually the ration of good to bad cholesterol that governs the level of risk your cholesterol level may give. The test we undertake determines your Total cholesterol level, and your LDL level, so the ratio can be determined and advice given accordingly.