Why Carry Out Health Surveillance?

The benefits of health surveillance are that it can:

- provide information to detect harmful health effects at an early stage, thereby protecting employees and confirming whether they are still fit to do their jobs;
- check that control measures are working well by giving feedback on risk assessments, suggesting where further action might be needed and what it might be;
- provide data, by means of the health records, to detect and evaluate risks;
- provide an opportunity to train and instruct employees further in safe and health working practices;
- give employees the chance to raise any concerns about the effect of their work on their health.

When Is Health Surveillance Appropriate?

Health surveillance is required where you answer 'yes' to all the following:

1. Is the work known to damage health in some particular way?
2. It is reasonably likely that damage to health may occur under the particular conditions at work?
3. Are there valid ways to detect the disease or condition? (Health surveillance is only worthwhile where it can reliably show that damage to health is starting to happen or becoming likely. A technique is only useful if it provides accurate results, is safe and practicable).
4. Is surveillance likely to benefit the employee?

For example, these criteria would be met in the following circumstances:

1. High noise levels are known to cause hearing loss;
2. A valid technique - hearing tests - can detect the effect of noise on the hearing of individuals who work in noisy conditions;
3. Hearing tests will benefit employees by identifying those at risk so that measures can be taken to protect them and improve working conditions.

Other tips for assessing whether health surveillance might be appropriate include:

- known previous cases of work related ill health in the workplace;
- reliance on Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as an exposure control measure;
- evidence of ill health in the jobs found in the construction industry.

Health surveillance is likely to be required for employees who are significantly exposed to:

- Hazardous substances such as chemicals, solvents, fumes, dusts, gases, vapours, aerosols, biological agents and carcinogenic materials (under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations);
- Asbestos (under COSHH and the Control of Asbestos Regulations);
- Lead (under COSHH and the Control of Lead at Work Regulations);
- Noise (under the Control of Noise at Work Regulations);
- Hand-Arm & Whole-Body Vibration (under the Control of Vibration at Work Regulations);
- Ionising Radiation (under the Ionising Radiation Regulations);
- Compressed Air work environments (under the Compressed Air Regulations);
- Ultra-violet radiation, i.e. direct sun light.

Hazardous Activities / Processes Not Requiring Health Surveillance

Many activities may be carried out by employees that although are hazardous to their health do not require formal health surveillance or where the exposures are so rare, short or slight that there is only a minimal risk to the employee. Employers must ensure that under these circumstances that all employees are provided with information, instructions and training on how to protect their health from these hazards

Keeping Records

Where health surveillance is carried out, individual health records must be kept for a considerable period. Under COSHH this is 40 years following the last entry; other regulations may or may not prescribe other specific requirements. Records should contain the following information:

1. surname and forename;
2. permanent address;
3. sex;
4. date of birth;
5. national insurance number;
6. date of commencement of present employment;
7. a historical record of jobs involving exposure to the hazardous substances requiring the health surveillance;

Where health surveillance is carried out which includes medical surveillance the records must also contain the following information:

8. date of health;
9. who carried out the surveillance;
10. conclusions of all other surveillance including decisions of the medical practitioner e.g. fitness for work (not including confidential clinical data).

Monitoring

Health surveillance is only appropriate and worthwhile if you can act on the results. If employees are suffering from an adverse health effect e.g. respiratory diseases or dermatitis then you must prevent further exposure to the substance. This may be by a change of process or material, by relocating the worker or by the provision of respiratory protective equipment (RPE) or personal protective equipment (PPE). RPE and PPE are only suitable where exposure to the substance is a small part of the work e.g. for short periods of time.

Conclusion

In assessing the need for health surveillance, remember the following:

- health surveillance is not a substitute for preventing or controlling exposure rather it is a way of seeking to protect employees' health;
- using the right technique, in the right way, at the right time is critical. Getting it wrong can be expensive. Also remember that some tests are themselves not free from risk (e.g. X-rays) and the results, if inaccurate or badly explained, could add additional stress to employees;
- whichever technique is used, you should carry out health surveillance systematically and regularly;
- simply carrying out health surveillance procedures is not enough; it is essential you act on the results.

Working with materials hazardous to health under COSHH

Below is a summary of some of the more common hazardous materials covered by COSHH. Using this and the information in the subsequent tables, you should be able to identify if health surveillance is applicable, such that it will help the health of employees who are significantly exposed to specific hazards during the course of their work.

SUBSTANCE/ACTIVITY	Carcinogenic	Respiratory sensitiser	Dermatitis	Chemnical burn	Systemic poisoning	Boliogical infection
Adhesives		✓	✓		✓	
Anthrax						✓
Arsenic					✓	
Asbestos	✓					
Bitumen and Bitumen Products		✓	✓			
Brick Acid			✓	✓		
Carbon Monoxide		✓			✓	
Cement		✓	✓			
Ceramic fibre products	✓	✓	✓			
Concrete				✓		
Diesel and Mechanical Oil Products	✓	✓	✓			
Epoxy Resins			✓			
Formwork release oils and releasing agents		✓	✓		✓	
Glass cleaners containing caustic and toxic hydrofluoric acid				✓		
Hepatitis						✓
Lead					✓	
Leptospirosis						✓
Medium Density Fibreboard		✓				
Mineral Wool Insulation Material	✓	✓	✓			
PCB's		✓	✓		✓	
Quartz dust from grinding stonework		✓	✓			
Silica dust from cutting, grinding activities (bricks, paving components etc)		✓	✓			
Solvent based paints		✓	✓		✓	
Varnishes		✓	✓			
Wood dust	✓	✓	✓			