



Occupational health and welfare: an overview

Managing occupational health and welfare issues in your workplace means taking steps to promote the well-being of, and to prevent illness and injury to, yourself and your employees.

This can range from reducing stress and drawing up a drugs and alcohol policy to stamping out bullying and harassment.

All businesses are likely to face a range of occupational health and welfare issues. This guide sets out the importance of tackling them and explains how to implement systems that can help you do so.

It also details the types of occupational health risk faced in many workplaces and the specific risks found in particular industries.

Promoting occupational health

Occupational health concerns aren't an optional extra - all employers have a legal duty of care to their employees. In addition, taking occupational health seriously can bring a range of business benefits:

- lower absenteeism - for further information, see our guide on how to [manage absence and sickness](#)
- improved relationships with customers and suppliers
- improved productivity
- reduced staff turnover

Overall, it can cut your business' costs and improve its performance.

Tackling occupational health in your workplace broadly involves addressing:

- stress
- repetitive strain injury or work-related upper limb disorders

- back pain
- bullying, discrimination and harassment by other staff, managers or members of the public, such as customers
- the control of hazardous substances
- heat, light and noise

You should use the workplace as a setting to promote health in areas such as:

- smoking
- drug and alcohol use
- disease prevention and control, eg coronary heart disease and obesity

You must comply with the smoking ban in most enclosed and substantially enclosed public places, workplaces and company vehicles used by more than one person. You can [read about the smoking ban in England on the Smokefree England website](#).

Support employees when they become ill by:

- following best practice on rehabilitation
- making reasonable adjustments

Occupational health problems are not only limited to immediate injury and disease. They can include the effects of long-term exposure to asbestos and other fibres, vapours and dusts, bacteria and viruses, noise, vibration and other physical risks. They can also include psychological and social issues such as violence, bullying and sexual harassment. See our guide on [supporting front-line managers](#).

For more information, see our guide on how to [improve employee health and well-being](#).

For more information on your wider health and safety duties, see our guide on [what you need to do about health and safety](#).

Key occupational health issues

You should consider anything which affects your employees' welfare as an occupational health issue:

- **Smoking, drug and alcohol abuse** - not only can an addiction affect an individual's performance, their behaviour can have a significant impact on colleagues. It is also against the

law to smoke in workplaces and company vehicles used by more than one person. See our guide on [smoking policies, drugs and alcohol abuse](#).

- **Stress** - excessive pressure, work concerns or personal problems can affect your employees' psychological, social and physical well-being. See our guide on [how to deal with stress](#).
- **Back pain and repetitive strain injury (RSI)** - a variety of lifting, repetitive and other kinds of work, including computer work, can result in injury or longer-term disability. Good ergonomics can help reduce the risks. See our guides on how to [prevent RSI and upper limb disorders](#) and [ensure the safe use of machinery, equipment and tools](#).
- **Control of hazardous substances** - using chemicals or other hazardous substances at work can put people's health at risk. You must control exposure to hazardous substances to prevent ill-health. See our guide on how to [manage harmful substances safely](#).
- **Disease prevention and control** - you should promote good health and take measures to reduce the risks of diseases, infections and allergies. See our guide to [diseases, infections and allergies](#).
- **Heat, light, noise and vibration** - consider exposure to sudden changes in temperature, poor lighting and excessive vibration or noise levels. [Read about vibration at work on the Health & Safety Executive \(HSE\) website](#). [Find out about excessive noise levels in the workplace on the HSE website](#). [Read about how temperature can affect employees on the HSE website](#).
- **Radiation** - exposure to radiation (ionising and non-ionising) is a risk in manufacturing, construction, engineering and education occupations as well as medical and dental practices and the nuclear industry. [Find out about the different types of radiation on the HSE website](#).
- **Violence, bullying and harassment** - physical violence or psychological intimidation can have a serious impact on an employee's well-being. An effective discipline and grievance procedure is essential in tackling such problems. See our guides on [bullying and harassment](#) and [handling discipline and grievance issues](#). In addition to protecting employees from harassment from other members of staff, you should also take steps to protect employees from harassment from third parties such as customers and suppliers.
- **Work-life balance** - working practices help employees achieve a better balance between their work and personal lives which can increase their productivity at work. See our guide on how to [meet the need for work/life balance](#).

For information on the support available to employers, see the page on [business advice lines for employee health issues](#) in our guide on how to [improve employee health and well-being](#).

Manage occupational health

To establish and maintain a working environment that safeguards staff welfare you need to put into place systems which allow you to:

- identify and involve workers in assessing workplace risks
- assess and consider employees' needs when planning and organising work

- provide advice, information and training to employees, as well as mechanisms for employee feedback such as a suggestion scheme
- regularly monitor and record employees' health

Effective management of occupation health aims to improve general health and prevent work-related illness and injury. It should also include intervening early when health problems arise, and helping those who have long-term sickness to return to work.

For more information, see the page on [employee health and well-being: what you can do](#) in our guide on how to [improve employee health and well-being](#).

Legal requirements

Some elements of occupational health are good practice, while others - such as the need to conduct a wide-ranging assessment of health and safety risks - are legally required. For further information, see our guide on [managing the risks in your business](#).

However, remember that you have a **legal duty of care** to your employees. This means you have a legal responsibility for all health and safety issues at work even those which are not covered by specific laws. You must assess all risks to employees' health and safety and take steps to control these risks. [Find a practical guide to risk assessment on the Health & Safety Executive \(HSE\) website](#).

Concerns in different industries

Depending on the business sector in which you operate, you and your employees are likely to face specific occupational health issues:

- **Transport** - you should consider drivers' comfort and posture as well as the hours they spend at the wheel.
- **Building and construction** - consider employees' fitness for particular tasks as well as preventing injury and exposure to excessive noise, vibration and hazardous materials. You can [read about occupational health in the construction industry on the Health & Safety Executive \(HSE\) website](#).
- **Manufacturing** - take into account a range of hazards, from excessive noise and temperature extremes, to potentially dangerous processes, materials and chemicals. You can [read about controlling hazardous substances on the HSE website](#) and [read about excessive noise on the HSE website](#). You can also [read about vibration on the HSE website](#) and [find out about other physical factors on the HSE website](#).

- **Agriculture** - consider possible causes of stress such as long hours and isolation as well as possible exposure to dangerous chemicals, pesticides and zoonoses (diseases that can be spread from animals to humans).
- **Offices** - look at the ergonomics - seating, desks, lighting and screens, noise levels. See our guides on how to [prevent RSI and upper limb disorders](#) and [ensure the safe use of machinery, equipment and tools](#).
- **Food and catering** - consider the risks of allergies and infections posed by contact with certain substances. See our guide on [food hygiene - an overview](#).
- **Retail, hotel and catering** - consider how you can protect employees, particularly those in customer-facing roles, from third-party harassment.
- **Warehousing** - consider how exposure to sudden changes in temperature, lifting heavy items and poor lighting can affect health.

Regardless of the industry, you should pay particular attention to the needs of new and expectant mothers. [Read about health and safety for new and expectant mothers on the HSE website](#).

You must also enforce the smoking ban. This means that all substantially enclosed public places, workplaces and company vehicles used by more than one person should be smokefree.

Many industries have very specific health and safety requirements - it's essential to ensure you're familiar with those affecting you.

Risks in the workplace

The condition and cleanliness of your workplace have a direct impact on the welfare of your employees. You must meet a range of minimum workplace standards under health and safety law.

You must provide:

- clean toilets, with water, soap and a towel or drier
- access to drinking water
- clean working areas, with waste regularly removed
- adequate space to work in
- a comfortable working temperature

In addition, you must ensure that your workplace and any company vehicles used by more than one person are smokefree.

For further information on the facilities you must provide, see our guides: [**what workplace facilities do you need to provide?**](#)

[**Download the guide on workplace health, safety and welfare from the Health & Safety Executive \(HSE\) website \(PDF\).**](#)

Other issues you may have to consider include:

- supplying ergonomic office equipment, ie designed to give maximum comfort and support
- ensuring levels of dust and fumes are kept down - minimising smell levels
- ensuring staff are not subjected to excessive levels of noise
- preventing contact with irritants or hazardous substances
- providing well maintained and comfortable rest areas
- implementing good communication channels

HSE Infoline

0845 345 0055

Health for Work Adviceline for Small Business

0800 0 77 88 44

NHS Credit Crunch Stressline

0300 123 2000

Related guides on businesslink.gov.uk

Reduce the cost of employee ill health with Health, Work and Well-being

Improve employee health and well-being

Diseases, infections and allergies

Manage absence and sickness

How to deal with stress

Smoking policies, drugs and alcohol abuse

Hours, rest breaks and the working week

Prevent RSI and upper limb disorders

Ensure the safe use of machinery, equipment and tools

Handling disciplinarys

Supporting front-line managers

Manage harmful substances safely

Bullying and harassment

Meet the need for work/life balance

Food hygiene - an overview

What workplace facilities do you need to provide?

Related web sites you might find useful

Online health and safety courses on the learndirect business website

<http://www2.learndirect-business.com/business-catalogue/health-and-safety/>

Adviceline information on the Health for Work Adviceline for Small Business website

<http://www.health4work.nhs.uk/>

Mental health issues in the workplace guidance on the Time to Change website

<http://www.time-to-change.org.uk/what-we-are-doing/time-challenge>

Download a guide to work-related stress and the law from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development website (PDF, 333K)

http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/health/stress/_work-related-stress-what-law-says.htm

Download guidance on fit notes from the Department for Work and Pensions website (PDF, 548K)

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/fitnote-employer-guide.pdf>

Stress information on the HSE website

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm>

Musculoskeletal disorder information on the HSE website

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/index.htm>

Control of Substances Hazardous to Health guidance on the HSE website

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/coshh/index.htm>

**Download tax rules for occupational health support purchases from the HSE website
(PDF, 538.64K)**

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/taxrules.pdf>

Practical risk assessment guidance on the HSE website

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/risk>

Construction industry occupational health guidance on the HSE website

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/index.htm>

Agricultural occupational health information on the HSE website

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/index.htm>

**Download workplace health, safety and welfare guidance from the HSE website (PDF,
172.06K)**

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg244.pdf>

You can find this guide by navigating to:

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