

HEALTH RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH CONSTRUCTION WORK

The UK construction industry employs more than 2 million people who have a high rate of occupational ill health because of the nature of their jobs. The effects of these illnesses can be devastating for the individuals and their families as there is often a long-term impact on quality of life and financial security.

The Health and Safety Executive reports that in 2009/10, 42 construction workers lost their lives, 3120 reported major injuries and 2.6million working days were lost through work related ill health.

Managing occupational health should not only focus on providing health checks before someone starts work, first aid, welfare, general information about health and safety, well-being and fitness to work, or managing sickness absence and return to work. ^[1]Managing occupational health should also focus on things one can do to reduce risks to workers' health.

Some of the health risks associated with construction work is explained below:

Respiratory disease - Work-related respiratory disease are caused or made worse by breathing in hazardous substances that damage the lungs. In the construction industry the most common of these diseases are chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), asthma and silicosis. To learn more about these diseases, please visit - <http://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/healthrisks/respiratory.htm>

Asbestos- before you commission or do any construction work that is likely to disturb asbestos, you will need to find out if there are any Asbestos Containing Materials (ACMs) in the premises or structure, and if so:

- the amount;
- where it is and what condition it is in;
- whether work is likely to disturb the material; and
- whether and how the material needs to be safely protected or removed

For demolition and refurbishment work, it is necessary to find out if there are any ACMs by either checking existing records or commissioning a suitable survey^[1] before any construction work begins. It is good practice to include the need to survey asbestos and protect or remove it in the initial project cost and programme.

For more information, please visit the following links <http://www.lhc.org.uk/asbestos-2> and <http://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/healthrisks/asbestos.htm>

Dermatitis - Contact dermatitis^[6] is inflammation of the skin that can arise from contact with a range of materials. The main signs and symptoms are dryness, redness, itching, swelling, flaking, cracking and blistering, and it can be very painful. Work-related dermatitis is caused or made worse by work. For further information on dermatitis and its effects on health, please visit <http://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/healthrisks/dermatitis.htm>

Hand-arm vibration - Hand-arm vibration (HAV) is transmitted from a work activity into someone's hands and arms. This occurs when: operating hand-held power tools,

using hand-guided equipment, or holding materials being processed by a machine. Regular and frequent exposure to hand-arm vibration can lead to permanent ill health. Occasional or low-level exposure is unlikely to cause ill health. For further information on HAV and its effects on health, please visit <http://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/healthrisks/hav.htm>

Musculoskeletal disorder - or MSD refers to an injury that affects the muscles, joints, tendons or spinal discs. Such injuries are most likely to affect the back, shoulders and neck, and legs. Symptoms may include pain, aching, discomfort, numbness, tingling and swelling. Workers who suffer from MSDs may have pain or discomfort and a reduced ability to carry out tasks. Serious cases can result in permanent disability. An ache or discomfort, unless spotted and dealt with effectively, can turn into a long-term injury. For further information on MSD and its effects on health, please visit <http://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/healthrisks/msd.htm>.

Noise - Regular, frequent exposure to loud noise can permanently damage a person's hearing. This is most likely if high noise exposure is a regular part of the job. Occasional or low-level exposure is unlikely to cause ill health. Noise can also create a safety risk if it makes it difficult for workers to communicate effectively or stops them hearing warning signals. Exposure to sudden, extremely loud noise can cause instant damage. Gradual hearing loss due to repeated exposure to noise is more common and it can take years for a worker to realise just how deaf they have become. Hearing loss can make it difficult to understand speech, but this is not the only problem. Some people develop tinnitus^[7] (ringing, whistling, buzzing or humming in the ears) which is a distressing condition that can disturb sleep. For further information on noise and its effects on health, please visit <http://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/healthrisks/noise.htm>

Stress - HSE defines stress as 'an adverse reaction to excessive pressure'. Pressure is often part and parcel of work and helps to keep people motivated. Excess, badly-managed exposure to pressure can lead to stress. Workers who experience stress, anxiety or depression are unlikely to perform effectively. This can be costly to employers and in safety-critical industries such as construction it can have serious consequences.

The HSE gives the top five most stressful aspects of work in construction as:

1. having too much work to do in the time available;
2. travelling or commuting;
3. being responsible for the safety of others at work;
4. working long hours; and
5. having a dangerous job.

For further information on work-related stress please visit <http://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/healthrisks/stress.htm>