

What is Occupational Health?

Definition

Occupational Health is the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of workers in all occupations by preventing departures from health, controlling risks and the adaptation of work to people, and people to their jobs.

The term “Occupational Health Services” means services entrusted with essentially preventive functions and responsible for advising the employer, the workers and their representatives in the undertaking, on :-

- the requirements for establishing and maintaining a safe and healthy working environment which will facilitate optimal physical and mental health in relation to work
- the adaptation of work to the capabilities of workers in the light of their state of physical and mental health

Occupational Health is about how work and the work environment can affect an employee’s health, and equally how an employee’s health can affect their ability to do the job.

The Size of the Problem

Work is an important determinant of health. It can influence health positively or negatively. Work related ill health accounts for some 28 million working days lost per year in the UK. By far the biggest cause of this is stress and related mental health issues.

Proactive occupational health programmes can reduce absence through illness, ensure compliance with employment legislation and deliver one of the most appreciated employee benefits.

Occupational Health Services

Good occupational health services are central to the effective management of workplace health. They can:-

- protect and promote the health and well-being of the working population creating a healthier workplace and a healthier workforce
- provide early intervention to help prevent staff being absent for health-related reasons, and improved opportunities for people to recover from illness while at work

- provide critical support to the process of effective absence management and increase the number of staff returning to work earlier
- fulfil the statutory requirement to have access to 'competent' occupational health advice as part of the organisational arrangements to ensure the health of staff and others is not adversely affected by their work

These services can include absence management, case management, health screening and surveillance, stress management, health education programmes and health management consultancy.

The Benefits

Access to an occupational health service offers employees the opportunity to explore any concerns about the effect of their workplace on their health. The occupational health service will operate ethically and independently. They will not discuss an employee's health without their consent. They do, however, have a duty to inform an employer about any reasonable adjustments that may be required.

Whilst GPs will be able to provide general advice on health problems they will not be in a position to investigate possible work related illness, nor are employers obliged to take any such advice from GPs.

Occupational health services will be able to work with both employers and employees regarding what may be required to allow that person to remain in, or return to, work.

Usually the employer's Human Resources Department (Personnel) will be able to provide further information regarding referrals to occupational health services.