

Control of Vibration at Work: Hand Arm Vibration Syndrome (HAVS)

HAVS Procedure



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Hand-Arm Vibration Syndrome

Hand-Arm Vibration Syndrome or HAVS is a condition that has the potential to affect any worker who uses powered hand-held or hand-guided or fed tools as a major part of their job. Workers whose hands are regularly exposed to high vibration may suffer from several kinds of effects to the hands and arm, including impaired blood circulation and damage to nerves and muscles. It is felt as a tingling or numbness in the fingers or where finger blanching (whitening) occurs.

The affects are cumulative and as time passes the attacks may involve considerable pain and loss of manual dexterity, resulting in clumsiness and reduced grip strength. In severe cases, blood circulation may be permanently impaired and fingers may take on a blue-black appearance.

Potential sources of high vibration in the workplace include:

- Chainsaws
- Strimmers and mowers
- Blowers and hedge trimmers
- Grinding and other rotary tools
- Powered hammers
- Concrete breakers
- Sanders
- Drills (short duration only)
- Timber and wood machining tools (short duration only)
- Percussive metal working tools
- Percussive tools used in stoneworking

Our aim is to ensure that no employee is subject to an unacceptable or unreasonable level of vibration at work by ensuring that there are safeguards in place. Health surveillance must be carried out for employees who are regularly exposed to vibration above the EAV (2.5m/s²), but is also required for those exposed below the EAV if they are at increased risk e.g. if they report a pre-existing diagnosis of HAVS or any other condition which affects circulation or nerve conduction such as diabetes, primary Raynaud's (a common condition that affects the blood supply to certain parts of the body, usually the fingers and toes) Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (CTS) etc.

The HAVS Health Surveillance is broken down into the following tiers and all employees are provided with training and information as outlined below:

Tier 1: Assessment Questionnaire

This initial assessment will be carried out for all employees who are identified as being at risk of exposure even if exposure is below the EAV of 2.5m/s². It is a short questionnaire used as a first check for people moving into jobs involving exposure to vibration. Your replies to the questionnaire will indicate whether you need to be referred to Tier 4 for a HAVS health assessment with the Occupational Health Physician.

Tier 2: Annual Assessment

Annual assessment carried out by the Occupational Health Nurse for those employees exposed at or above the EAV and for those exposed below the EAV who have been identified as being at increased risk of HAVS. It is a short questionnaire to check whether the employee needs to be referred to Tier 4 for a HAVS health assessment with the Occupational Health Physician.

Tier 3: 3rd Year Health Assessment

This involves a HAVS health assessment by a qualified person (i.e. an Occupational Health Nurse) every 3rd year or as required. It is a more detailed questionnaire with some basic grip and dexterity tests. If the assessment shows that the employee may have HAVS, Tier 4 will apply and the employee will be referred to the Occupational Health Physician.

Tier 4: Specific Tests with OH Physician

Detailed questionnaire and a range of specific tests to give a formal diagnosis and is carried out by the Occupational Health Physician, who will advise you on the employee's fitness for work.

Tier 5: Referral

This is optional and involves referral of the employee for more comprehensive tests for HAVS to a specialist facility (e.g. Health and Safety Laboratory in Buxton). The results may help the Occupational Health Physician assess fitness for work.

Training and information

Training is given by the Health and Safety Advisors, the Departmental Development Advisor and the Departmental Development Officer.

New employees should be made aware of the risks of vibration prior to first exposure, or at least within the first week of employment. In addition, all employees should be given appropriate training in the use of equipment. This should include periodic supervised practice to identify work practices which may increase risk such as poor postures, gripping equipment too tightly etc.

All employees who are exposed to vibration should be given training to include:

- The health effects of hand-arm vibration;
- Sources of hand-arm vibration;
- Whether they are at risk, and if so whether the risk is high (above the ELV), medium (above the EAV) or low;
- The risk factors (e.g. the levels of vibration, daily exposure duration, regularity of exposure over weeks, months and years);
- How to recognise and report symptoms;
- The need for health surveillance, how it can help them remain fit for work, how it will be provided, and what will happen to the results;
- Ways to minimise risk including:
 - Changes to working practices to reduce vibration exposure;
 - Correct techniques for equipment use, how to reduce grip force etc.;
 - Maintenance of good blood circulation at work by keeping warm and massaging fingers and if possible, cutting down or quitting smoking.

NB: If an individual reports any symptoms or signs of HAVS at any stage between Tiers 1-3 they will be referred for a Tier 4 health assessment with the Occupational Health Physician. All individual records will be held in confidence and an anonymous annual report will be available on all employees who have attended for health surveillance and any Tier 4 reviews with the Occupational Health Physician. Where appropriate, summary results for groups of employees will be reported to indicate the effectiveness of vibration control.

Please do not ignore symptoms. If you feel vibration could be affecting your fingers or hands you must stop work and report the matter to your manager immediately. He / she will arrange for you to be referred to the Occupational Health Advisor.