

Respiratory health surveillance standard briefing – supporting notes

The 'Health surveillance for silica and asbestos and the management of diagnosed occupational respiratory conditions' standard (NR/L2/OHS/157) was published on 4 March 2017 and has a compliance date of 3 June 2017.

The compliance to this standard is vital to the protection of our employee's long term health. It will help to support the mitigation of adverse ill health.

This is a new standard.

The standard is being implemented to:

- establish the baseline respiratory status of a new employee, undergoing a level 1 competence medical
- establish the respiratory status of current employees dependant on exposure
- detect the early signs of developing or worsening respiratory conditions
- identify and protect vulnerable employees such as those with pre-existing respiratory health conditions e.g. asthma
- confirm employees' fitness to continue undertaking work with an exposure to an airborne contaminant
- support evaluation of mitigations to control exposure to respiratory hazards

What are respiratory hazards?

Respiratory hazards are substances in the air that are produced from dusts such as asbestos fibres or silica which is found in ballast, they also present themselves in fumes and gases. If exposure is uncontrolled or prolonged, and inhalation occurs, this can have an adverse effect on your lungs. If you regularly work with these substances and exposure is not controlled properly, you may be at risk developing a respiratory illness.

What will the health surveillance involve?

The initial health surveillance will consist of a face to face assessment with an occupational health practitioner (OHP). This face to face assessment will include:

- the completion of a questionnaire which will be provided to the employee by the OHP upon arrival to health surveillance and,
- a lung function test using a spirometer.

Where an employee, through following the above process, is identified as having worked with an exposure to Respirable Crystalline Silica (RCS) for 15 years or more, the employees will be referred for a chest X-ray. The employee will be recalled annually for health surveillance and 3 yearly for X-ray.

Employees who do not meet the 15year criteria but return an abnormal lung function test may be referred to a chest clinic however this is dependent on the clinician's assessment and clinical conclusions.

Any employee referred for respiratory health surveillance following the criteria's for referral will be recalled annually.

New employees undergoing a level 1 medical competence will receive a baseline respiratory assessment.

Where an inadvertent exposure to asbestos has occurred, a level 1 investigation must be undertaken. Where it is confirmed an employee has been inadvertently exposed to asbestos, line managers can refer them to the asbestos helpline and or for a medical assessment. Please note a medical assessment is not health surveillance.

What is the workplace exposure limit (WEL)?

WELs are British occupational exposure limits and are set in order to help protect the health of workers. WELs are concentrations of hazardous substances in the air, averaged over a specified period of time, referred to as a time-weighted average (TWA). Two time periods are used:

- long-term (8 hours)
- short-term (15 minutes) short-term exposure limits (STELs) are set to help prevent effects such as eye irritation, which may occur following exposure for a few minutes

More information on workplace exposure limits can be found in the Health and Safety Executive's Workplace exposure limits publication - <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/priced/eh40.pdf>.

What is a Health Management Action Plan?

The health management action plan (HMAP) forms a record of discussions between line manager and employee, together with control measures implemented by Network Rail as a safeguard regarding an employee's health and wellbeing.

The health management action plan form has been developed to assist Network Rail line managers in managing health in the workplace.

For more information on the Health Management Action Plan, and to access the form, you can visit Safety Central - <https://safety.networkrail.co.uk/healthandwellbeing/supporting-wellbeing-at-work/health-management-action-plan-hmap/>.