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Testing Standards in the Workplace

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Testing Standards in the Workplace

Hand-Arm Vibration Syndrome



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Anyone who regularly and frequently is exposed to high levels of vibration can suffer permanent injury. There is no effective treatment; prevention is the only cure.

Vibration hazards at work manifest themselves in two forms:

- **Whole body vibration (WBV) where the body is shaken by a machine or vehicle**
- **Hand-arm vibration (HAV) where vibration effect is localised to specific parts of the body.**

Exposure to hand-arm vibration may result in a range of health effects collectively known as Hand-Arm Vibration Syndrome or HAVS. The most well known is vibration white finger (VWF); other effects include damage to nerves, muscles and joints. A Medical Research Council survey recently estimated 301,000 suffers of VWF in Great Britain.

VWF is a prescribed disease, so the worst affected workers may be eligible for Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit. Workers suffering relatively mild symptoms of VWF can secure compensation up to £7000 through the courts.

Workers exposed to Whole Body Vibration (WBF) experience symptoms ranging from fatigue, insomnia, headaches, and shakiness through to circulatory, bowel, respiratory, muscular and back disorders. WBV is a particular risk to plant and machinery operators. Most at risk of VWF are regular users of hand-held powered tools such as:

- Concrete Breakers
- Chipping Hammers
- Jigger Picks
- Vibrating Pokers
- Sanders
- Angle Grinders
- Vibratory Compactors
- Hammer Drills
- Jigsaws
- Scabblers.



A list of the symptoms of VWF from its mildest form to its most severe are:

- **Tingling and numbness in the fingers, often continuing after use of machinery.**
- **One finger temporarily turns white and may start to ache.**
- **The finger turns white more often.**
- **Other fingers begin turning white.**
- **After several fingers turn white, the disease is probably irreversible; the thumb is not usually affected.**
- **The sufferer experiences increasingly frequent painful attacks at any time.**
- **In extreme cases the sufferer may lose fingers - this is more likely when the worker is using vibrating machinery at very low temperatures.**

Symptoms tend to be particularly bad during cold weather conditions.

There are no specific duties that employers have to follow to reduce vibration risks at work; however, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require that the employer must carry out a risk assessment and establish controls of vibration injury risks.

Risk factors to consider include:

- The amount of tool vibration
- The length of time for which the tool is used
- Establishing whether the tool is used continuously or intermittently
- The temperature of the workplace
- The work method
- The ergonomics of the task
- Each worker's susceptibility to injury

The Control of Vibration at Work Regulations will implement the European Union's Physical Agents (Vibration) Directive 1999 covering VWF and WBV. These Regulations have to be in effect before July 2005.

The Regulations will stipulate:

- **Exposure Action Values - the level above which the employer must take measures to control the vibration risk.**
- **Exposure Limit Values - the level at which further daily exposure must be prevented.**

The following steps are believed to help prevent HAVS in workers who use vibrating tools.

- **Hold tools as loosely as possible, and in varying positions.**
- **Ensure that tools are well maintained.**
- **Use tools correctly, and use the right tool for the job. The aim is not to need excessive grip or to use a tool for longer than necessary.**
- **Use anti-vibration gloves.**
- **Take regular breaks of at least 10 minutes away from the tool. Short bursts of work are better than long periods of work without a break.**
- **Keep warm while at work. Especially the hands to keep the blood flow as good as possible.**
- **You should not smoke - the chemicals in tobacco can affect blood flow.**
- **Regular screening and long term risk management.**

