

# examinetics

## Occupational Health Pathfinder

### Medical screening and surveillance

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#### Overview

Medical surveillance involves the monitoring and evaluation of employees over time in order to detect early signs of any conditions that may be related to (i) tasks being performed and (ii) exposure to hazardous agents through work-related activities. The information gleaned from analysis, usually undertaken by a trained physician, provides an employer with information related to the effectiveness of the organization's hazard prevention programs. It can also identify new problem areas that need to be addressed. Medical screening and surveillance is not required for all jobs, but it is mandatory for those where exposure to hazardous materials or chemicals occurs on a regular or daily basis.

#### Medical screening and surveillance is a process

Medical screening is typically used to detect disease or conditions before an individual would normally seek medical care as a consequence of developing signs and symptoms. For example, biological screening would involve the collection of bodily samples such as blood, urine, expired air or sputum to look for evidence of exposure to chemicals or their breakdown products before any symptoms of health conditions occur as a result of their exposure.

Medical surveillance involves the collection, analysis and evaluation of data in relation to aspects of occupational disease and is usually undertaken for workers who are known to be exposed to hazards that can result in particular conditions. One example would be the detection of hearing threshold shifts, through audiometric testing, in workers exposed to high levels of noise.

The implementation of a medical screening and surveillance program begins when an employer ascertains that there are significant exposures to chemical, biological, physical or biomechanical hazards in the workplace. Those employees considered at risk would then normally undergo a review of their work and medical history and initial screenings to discover a baseline measure of the worker's health. Future tests would then either remain the same or reveal a shift from the baseline pattern which may require medical intervention and a review of current prevention programs.

#### Regulatory issues

Specific medical surveillance guidelines and standards can be found on the OSHA website. For example, there are guidelines for asbestos (non mandatory; 1910.1001 App H), inorganic arsenic (1910.1018 App C), Benzene (1910.1028 App C) and acrylonitrile (1910.1045 App C) among others. Your occupational health service provider will be able to advise on the specific medical screening and surveillance programs that would be appropriate for the workers within your business.

#### KEY POINT SUMMARY:

- Medical surveillance monitors and evaluates employees over time to detect early signs of medical conditions that can arise due to exposure to hazards through work-related activities
- Medical screening is used to detect conditions before an individual would normally seek medical care (ie before symptoms appear)
- The information gleaned from analysis, undertaken by a trained physician, provides an employer with information related to the effectiveness of their hazard prevention programs
- In medical surveillance, employees undergo a review of their work and medical history and initial screenings define baseline measures
- Future tests would then either remain the same or reveal a shift from the baseline which may require medical intervention and a review of current prevention programs

#### FIND OUT MORE...

**OSHA website**  
[www.osha.gov/SLTC/medicalsurveillance/surveillance.html](http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/medicalsurveillance/surveillance.html)

**National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health**  
[www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/surveillance/](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/surveillance/)

**Business Owner Briefing**  
*"Screening and surveillance: a guide to OSHA standards"*  
[www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3162.pdf](http://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3162.pdf)

**Medical Director Review**  
*"Medical Surveillance in Work-Site Safety and Health Programs"*  
(Wesdock & Sokas, 2000)  
[www.aafp.org/afp/20000501/2785.html](http://www.aafp.org/afp/20000501/2785.html)

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