

Occupational Health: Promoting & Maintaining Worker Health

This OSACH Fast Fact is intended to inform workers, supervisors, managers and JHSC members about occupational health and its role in promoting and protecting the health and well being of workers.

Employers have an ethical, legal and moral obligation to ensure that the health and safety of their workers is not endangered by their job/tasks or work environment. People are the most valuable and expensive resource in every workplace — therefore, employers need to protect them. Since many of us spend about one third of our weekdays at work, we need the occupational health team to ensure that these workplaces are not dangerous to our health.

What is Occupational Health?

Occupational health is concerned with:

- Promoting and maintaining the highest degree of health in the workplace.
- Preventing worker illness and injury due to working conditions.
- Protecting workers from exposure to factors known to lead to illness or injury.
- Ensuring that workers are placed in work settings adapted to their physical and psychological needs.

For the purposes of this Fast Fact, “health” refers to the physical, mental and social well being of workers.

Who is Involved?

Occupational health involves hazard recognition, identification, evaluation and resolution. Therefore, professionals from many fields must work together as a multidisciplinary team.

The multidisciplinary team includes members from the Internal Responsibility System (IRS) — which is usually composed of the employer, supervisors and workers — as well as occupational health nurses and physicians, industrial hygienists, safety professionals, infection control practitioners, ergonomists, members of the JHSC and other specialists as needed. The goal of the multidisciplinary team is to design, implement and evaluate a comprehensive health and safety program that will maintain and enhance health, promote safety and probably, as a side effect, increase productivity.

Large facilities may have a formal occupational health service, in keeping with the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA) and First Aid Regulations, to carry out many activities related to protecting worker health. Smaller facilities and non-institutional organizations may have a part-time occupational health nurse as well as physicians. Alternatively, they may contract with professionals in the community to carry out specific tasks such as health assessments and hearing tests. In any case, all hospitals subject to the Public Hospitals’ Act must provide occupational health services by law.

It is preferable to have an onsite service so the nurse becomes familiar with the workers’ needs, job/tasks, work processes and overall health needs in the workplace.

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Major Activities

Occupational health emphasizes health promotion and disease prevention rather than primarily responding to medical emergencies on the job.

Health Surveillance

Health surveillance includes all activities involved in observing, assessing and supervising the workers' health. These activities are aimed at assessing the employees' fitness for particular tasks and ensuring that workers' health is not placed at risk by their job activities.

As a health professional, the occupational health nurse (OHN) is accountable for the nursing care provided to the employee first and to the employer second. The credibility of the service rests on the ability of the nurse and physician to maintain the confidentiality of all employee health information unless formally requested and approved by the specific worker.

Environmental Surveillance

Environmental surveillance involves activities such as anticipating, recognizing, evaluating and controlling factors in the workplace that may place the worker's health at risk. The OHN works with other team members to provide an environment as free as possible from hazards.

Hazards may be chemical, physical or biological agents or ergonomic factors that can have a negative effect on the health and well being of workers. The activities of the OHN in no way circumvents the responsibilities of workers, supervisors and the employer as identified in the OHSA.

Education

The OHN may be involved in educating both management and workers to identify potential workplace hazards. The OHN may also be responsible for educating workers, supervisors and the employer about health and safety legislation and their responsibilities for implementing worker health and safety programs.

Occupational health education ensures that workers know about the biological, chemical, physical, ergonomic and psychosocial hazards associated with their jobs and responsibilities as outlined by the OHSA.

Management/Administration

The OHN is normally involved in organizing, staffing, equipping, maintaining and evaluating occupational health services. In addition, the OHN maintains accurate and complete records of the nursing services provided to workers.

The success of the program will depend on the employer's commitment and support in developing and implementing proactive occupational health programs. These programs must also be continually evaluated to assess their effectiveness in promoting and maintaining worker health by the JHSC. In addition, success requires worker involvement in supporting and using the program's resources to promote and maintain health.



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