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Complete Health Environmental and Safety Services

Your Friendly Neighborhood Occupational Health Clinic

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Complete Health, Environmental & Safety Services, Inc. (CHESSE)

Do you use an occupational medicine clinic? Do you know why you should?

We can think of three situations where your company may need to consult with a licensed health care professional.

If an employee is injured and needs medical treatment:

If the injury is so severe that an ambulance is needed, go to the nearest emergency room. But for less severe injuries, expect a long wait and high cost from that emergency room. You could use an urgent care clinic, or the employee could go to his own physician. But occupational health clinics know the workers' compensation system, so they'll know what paperwork you need. And because they're familiar with working environments, they're better able to work with you to get your employee back to work quickly. If you have an agreement with an occupational health clinic, you can call the clinic to tell them your injured employee is on the way. Instead of waiting for hours, the employee can be seen and get back to work, within limitations, right away.

If your employees wear respirators:

Respirators put strain on the heart and lungs. You wouldn't want to give a respirator to someone who couldn't physically handle wearing that respirator. That person might physically struggle to do the job with the mask on. Or he might skip the respirator, exposing himself to harmful levels of contaminants.

Before you assign employees to tasks such as painting, then, OSHA requires that those employees receive medical approval to wear the respirators. The respirator standard spells out the exact process for approval. The employee has to complete a specific questionnaire, which asks questions such as whether he smokes, or coughs when he wakes up, or has difficulty climbing stairs. The questionnaire also asks for information about using the respirator –what type of mask, under what conditions, for what purpose.

The questionnaire has to be reviewed by a physician or licensed health care professional. If the answers to any of the questions raise a red flag, the health care professional needs to investigate further. That might mean just talking to the employee, or could mean a doctor's visit, with a lung function test. Based on the answers and any further evaluation done, the health care professional may okay respirator use, or may put conditions on the use, such as limiting the employee to using an airline respirator.

Medical approval is required before employees are assigned to any tasks requiring any type of respirator. If employees choose to wear a cartridge-type respirator, medical approval is needed. The only respirator users who don't need medical approval are those who wear dust masks (filtering facepieces) voluntarily, not because they need to.

How often is medical approval needed? That's the decision of the health care provider. Some say each year, some decide based on the employee's condition. If the employee develops any lung or heart problems or has difficulty breathing with the mask on, it's time for reevaluation.

If your employees work in a noisy environment:

Working on metal or with air powered tools gets noisy. Employees aren't exposed to continuously loud noise, but we've measured noise levels well over 100 dBA in body shops. If employees have repeated exposure to those levels, they'll lose their hearing.

OSHA requires annual hearing tests for employees exposed to more than 85 dBA, averaged over eight hours (or more than 100 dBA for one hour). The hearing tests aren't a substitute for buying quieter tools or for using hearing protection. Instead, they're intended to detect hearing loss before it seriously interferes with life activities. The hope is that if hearing loss is detected, both employer and employee will try harder to reduce exposure.

Does it seem like a pain to send your employees to the clinic for all these? They'll have to go there if they're injured. But the respirator evaluation may not require a trip. Many clinics will provide you with the questionnaire, which you can have employees put into a sealed envelope (it's considered confidential medical information) and mail to the clinic. There's even an online provider. Audiograms need to be done in person, but several mobile services will bring their testing booths to your facility.

The services of an occupational health clinic aren't free, of course. But compare costs. Would you prefer to pay for injury treatment that gets your employee back on the job quickly, an audiogram, and respirator approval? Or would you prefer risking the cost of permanent partial disability?

If you have questions about respirator medicals, audiograms, or working with occupational health clinics, contact CHESS at 651-481-9787; toll free at 877-482-4377, or carkey@chess-safety.com.

This article is intended to provide general information (not advice) about current safety topics. To discuss your specific concerns and how CHESS may help, please contact CHESS at 651-481-9787 or chess@chess-safety.com
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