

DOS & DON'TS: Don't Ignore Workers' Health Complaints



If a worker complains of symptoms or a medical condition that could be related to a safety hazard or conditions in the workplace, you can't simply ignore the worker's complaints or concerns. Instead, you must investigate the worker's health complaints to determine their cause and then take appropriate steps to address the cause if its work-related. For example, if a worker complains of constant back pain, assess his work station to see if it's too high or too low and then adjust it accordingly. (You should also have a medical surveillance program to monitor workers proactively for symptoms of certain conditions so they can be treated early.) If you just ignore the worker's symptoms and it turns out his condition *is* work-related, you may face safety violations.

Look what happened to a ground engineering company in Great Britain. A worker for the company repeatedly flagged symptoms such as tingling, numbness and pain in his hands to the company for *more than five years*. He was eventually diagnosed with severe hand-arm vibration syndrome (HAVS). An investigation by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) found that the company didn't have a suitable health surveillance program in place to monitor for the early onset of HAVS and to prevent the irreversible condition from developing.

As a result, the company pleaded guilty to violating the *Control of Vibration at Work Regulations 2005* and was fined £6,000. Speaking after the hearing, HSE inspector Mehtaab Hamid said that if the company had had the right systems in place to monitor workers' health, the worker's condition wouldn't have been allowed 'to develop to a severe and life-altering stage' [Keller Ltd., HSE News Release, Feb. 6, 2017].

Insider Says: For more on medical monitoring or surveillance programs, which are intended to prevent workers from developing health conditions such as black lung disease and mesothelioma, see 'Occupational Illness: A 7-Step Medical Monitoring Compliance Plan.' And for more on HAVS, see 'Spot the Safety Violation: Good Vibrations' Not So Much.?