

Safety focus

Medical Surveillance 101

Proactive safety professionals know it's best to evaluate before a potential hazard requires intervention. One critical safety tool used in this process is medical surveillance. It sounds ominous, but it's vital to detecting early signs of work-related illness and/or injury. And for some job tasks or workplace environments that have known occupational hazards, OSHA or clients require medical surveillance.

What is Medical Surveillance?

Medical surveillance is the systematic assessment of employees exposed or potentially exposed to occupational hazards. This assessment monitors individuals for adverse health effects and determines the effectiveness of exposure prevention strategies. A medical surveillance program includes the analysis of both individual and aggregate surveillance data over time, with the goal of reducing and ultimately preventing occupational illness and injury.

Medical surveillance contributes significantly to the success of worksite health and safety programs and in some case required by OSHA. OSHA medical surveillance requirements are generally clinically focused (medical and work histories, physical assessment, biological testing), with information obtained from the clinical processes used in the monitoring and analysis elements of medical surveillance.

Medical surveillance is addressed in specific standards for example, in general industry orders:

- 1910.120, Hazardous waste operations and emergency response (HAZWOPER)
- 1910.134, Respiratory protection
- Subpart Z, Toxic Substances and Hazardous Substances, 1910.1001-1018, 1024-1053, and 1450

Who Needs to Be Involved?

Only employees working on job tasks/functions or in environments falling under the specific OSHA standards or client-specific requirements, are required to participate in the medical surveillance program.

Medical surveillance programs should be designed and implemented by qualified professionals.

Specific test results and other personal medical information generated by these exams will be kept confidential between the employee and the physician. The physician will determine the scope of the exam, then inform the employer of their recommendations based on the exam results. The employer will discuss these recommendations, if any, with the employee. The employee can contact the physician who performs the

exam with any questions regarding the test results, and may request copies of results at any time.

Surveillance Schedule

Generally, medical surveillance programs establish the following examination and testing schedule:

- Before being assigned to a job that could expose an employee to the hazard identified in the relevant OSHA standard (usually a preemployment physical).
- Periodically thereafter (often annually, but may be more often depending on risk or specific substances involved).
- When an employee reports symptoms or an exposure above the permissible exposure level.
- When the examining doctor determines follow-up or additional examinations are required.
- When employment is terminated or an employee is transferred to a job not covered by a medical surveillance requirement.

Sources: <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/medicalsurveillance/>; <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/wp-solutions/2013-103/pdfs/2013-103.pdf>; <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/medicalsurveillance/standards.html>

SAFETY WATCH

