

Occupational health

1 . Using occupational health at work

Occupational health is a type of medical service.

An employer might use occupational health to help them make decisions about:

- a worker who is struggling with their physical or mental health
- the right [reasonable adjustments](#) for someone who is disabled
- someone who has been off sick for a long time or is returning to work after sickness absence
- how to reduce the amount of time people need to take off sick
- keeping to other health and safety regulations
- managing risks to mental health, such as too much pressure at work or bullying

Occupational health could be through the employer's own occupational health service or an outside agency.

Checking if your work uses occupational health

It's a good idea to check if your organisation has an occupational health policy.

This should say:

- when an occupational health referral or assessment can be made
- how an occupational health assessment is carried out
- what both the employer and worker need to do
- what the next steps are after the occupational health assessment – for example, review whether the adjustments have helped

Smaller organisations might not have an occupational health policy or scheme. In this case, the employer should communicate with both the worker and their doctor. The employer must get permission before contacting the worker's doctor.

[Find out more about getting a doctor's report about a worker's health](#)

2. Occupational health assessments

An employer can ask a worker if they'll agree to an assessment with an occupational health adviser or another qualified professional.

The worker does not have to agree to an occupational health assessment but it can help to:

- get any support they need to feel better and be able to do their job
- return to work safely and more quickly
- avoid their employer making big decisions without important information
- avoid anything that could cause further health or absence issues

After an assessment, the occupational health adviser must ask for the worker's permission before sharing it with their employer.

If a doctor carries out the occupational health assessment the employer must inform the worker in writing of their rights.

[Find out more about rights under the Access to Medical Reports Act 1988](#)

What happens in an occupational health assessment

An occupational health adviser might ask the worker about:

- their health
- any treatment they're having
- any concerns they have about returning to work

Sometimes the occupational health adviser might need to [get more information from the worker's doctor](#). In this case, the worker should be told the reason and asked to sign a consent form.

The worker has the right to see the doctor's report before it is sent to the occupational health adviser.

Whether someone gets paid for attending occupational health appointments should be written in the organisation's policy, so it's a good idea to check. If a disabled worker is put at a disadvantage because their employer does not pay for their time, this could be [disability discrimination](#).

Example of using occupational health at work

Kai has a back injury. Their employer asks an occupational health adviser to carry out an assessment.

The assessment says that the worker needs their work chair adjusted. The employer considers this reasonable and arranges the adjustment. This helps Kai work comfortably and avoids making their injury worse.

How an occupational health assessment is used

An occupational health assessment is a useful addition to a [fit note](#) or a doctor's medical report. This is because an occupational health assessment is more focused on:

- how someone does their job
- how the job might affect someone's health

The employer should consider the recommendations of both the occupational health assessment and doctor's report to help them decide what to do.

If there is any conflicting advice, they should talk with their worker and come to an agreement on the best course of action.

The employer and worker can then plan how to support them and help them return to work wherever possible.

They might agree that the worker needs:

- more time off work
- a referral for an appropriate course of therapy, for example physiotherapy or counselling
- adjustments to their workspace, for example an ergonomic chair
- a [phased return to work](#), for example reduced working hours or lighter duties

Depending on the health issue, the worker's progress might need to be assessed again before a firm agreement can be made about their return to work or to full duties.

It's up to the employer to decide whether to put in place the recommendations from the occupational health assessment. Their decision should be informed by the needs of the organisation but also their legal obligations to the worker.

Making reasonable adjustments

The occupational health report might recommend adjustments.

By law, employers must make reasonable adjustments when they know, or could reasonably be expected to know, someone is disabled.

An employer does not have to make adjustments that are unreasonable. However, they should still find other ways to support someone. This could include making other adjustments that are reasonable.

[Find out more about making reasonable adjustments at work](#)

Keeping information confidential

The employer must keep any information they get about a worker confidential. The information should only be available to those who genuinely need access to it. This could include the worker's line manager and the HR team.

The employer should keep the worker informed of how they're storing and using the report about their health.

The employer should also let their worker know from the start how to withdraw their consent to a report, if they later wish to.

[Find out more about disclosure of occupational health information from the Information Commissioner's Office](#)

Raising a problem about occupational health

If a worker has a problem relating to occupational health, they should raise it with their employer. For example if:

- they're unhappy with how occupational health has been used
- reasonable adjustments have not been made
- they're unhappy with how their confidential information has been handled

It's usually best to raise a problem informally first. They can do this by talking with their employer.

[Find out more about raising a problem at work](#)

Contact the Acas helpline

If you have any questions about occupational health, [contact the Acas helpline](#).