

## **Protecting your health at work / Health & Safety Executive.**

### **Contributors**

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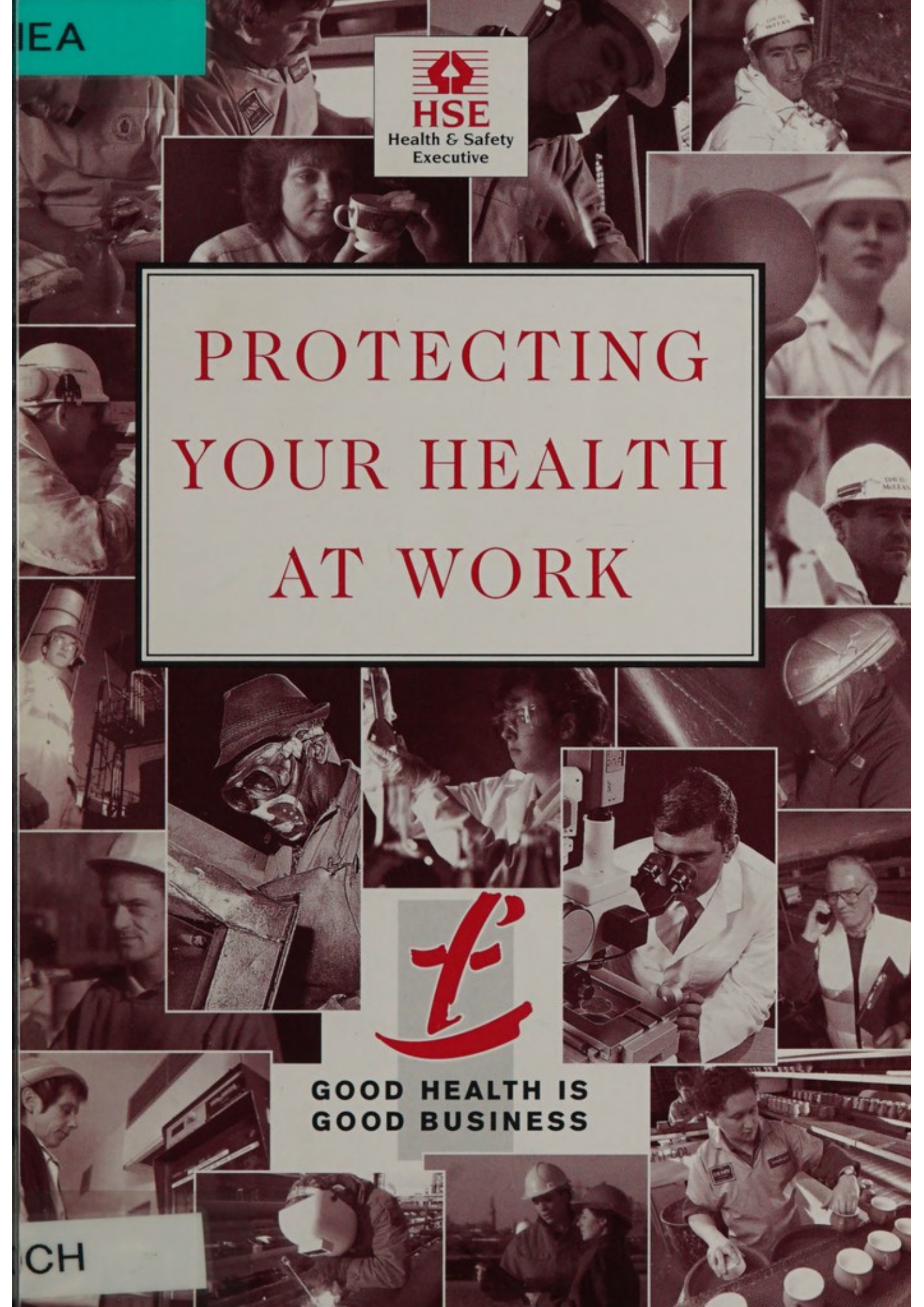


PROTECTING  
YOUR HEALTH  
AT WORK



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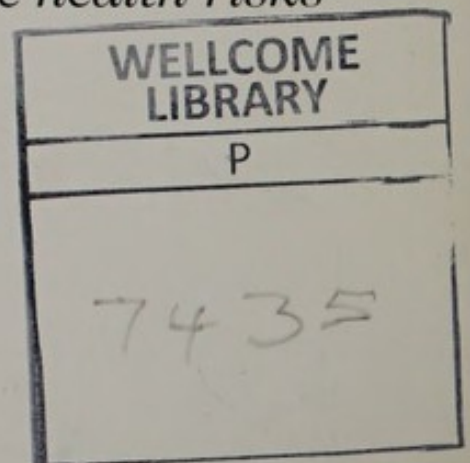
*Every year 2.2 million people suffer ill health  
caused or made worse by work.*

*This leaflet describes some of the common causes  
of work-related illness and provides advice on  
how you can help to protect  
your health.*

*HSE's Good Health is Good Business Campaign  
aims to stop people being made ill by their work  
by helping employers to manage health risks  
effectively.*



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## *Your employer has a responsibility to:*

- assess your workplace to see what hazards are present and if they pose risks to your health and safety;
- take steps to remove or control the risks;
- make sure the protective measures taken are effective;
- provide you with information, instruction and training about the measures.

## *Your responsibility*

You are required to co-operate with any measures that your employer takes to protect your health at work. For example:

- don't eat, drink or smoke in the workplace where substances that might be hazardous are used; they can be absorbed through your food or your cigarette;
- for the same reason, wash your hands before eating, drinking or smoking;
- read the hazard warning labels on containers and follow the advice;
- wear and take care of any personal protective equipment provided for you.



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## ***What to do if you think something about your work is making you ill***

- Check any information provided on the possible health risks connected with your work;
- tell your boss or supervisor and if you have one, your safety representative;
- go and see your doctor - describe your job and ask if your illness might be work-related.

You can get professional advice from an occupational health service if one is provided by your employer. If not, free confidential advice is provided by the Employment Medical Advisory Service of the Health and Safety Executive.

## ***How you can help yourself***

The most common forms of work-related ill health are muscle and joint aches; pains in the back, arms, hands and shoulders; skin disorders, particularly of the hands; lung diseases; hearing loss, deafness and stress.





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## **Protect your back, muscles and joints**

Many disorders which affect the bones, muscles and the ligaments, etc, which hold them together are caused or made worse by work. They are by far the largest cause of ill health at work and range from back pain to problems with hands and arms. The causes of these problems are usually very simple, such as incorrect handling of loads, poor work layout and badly managed repetitive work. They can often as easily be prevented.

Manual handling is a major cause of back injuries and contrary to popular belief they can't all be prevented simply by adopting good handling techniques. So before lifting or moving any load - stop and think!

*Do you have to?*

- Consider the use of handling equipment, like a trolley or hoist, instead.

*If you have to, check out the risks and what you need to know to do it safely. Make sure:*

- you know the weight and distribution of the load - find out if it is too heavy or awkward for you;
- you follow any instructions that have been made to make the task safe;
- you find out if the surroundings can be changed to make the task less difficult.



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## **Protect your hands and arms**

People who get pains, swelling or disability in their hands and arms as a result of work usually have jobs which involve rapid, repetitive or unnatural movements - they range from poultry processors to VDU operators. If you are at risk then you need to know about the likely causes, the early symptoms, such as numbness and 'pins and needles', and how they can be avoided. So make sure:

- your workstation is properly laid out, so that the equipment and materials are within easy reach;
- when seated, your work surface and chair are at the right height for you and there is nothing to prevent you from sitting comfortably and easily changing posture;
- your work is properly paced and you are able to take breaks; this does not necessarily mean rest breaks. It includes doing other types of work in which you use different muscles and postures;
- you have been properly trained to do your work;
- the tools and equipment you need for the work are comfortable to use and don't need too much force to operate;
- you have done something about any pain or numbness in your hands or arms - like telling your supervisor.





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Regular users of hand operated tools and machinery producing high levels of vibration may develop a painful condition known as vibration white finger. The risk of developing vibration white finger can be reduced in a number of ways, including:

- using the right tool for the job;
- keeping tools and equipment in good working order to minimise vibration;
- avoiding using the equipment for long periods without a break.

### **Protect your skin**

At work the areas of skin most at risk are on the hands, forearms and the legs above footwear. The commonest form of harm is redness, itching, scaling and irritation of the exposed area. Where feasible, exposure should be avoided by using a less harmful substance. To help protect your skin:

- keep workplace and equipment clean and free of contamination to prevent skin exposure during handling and use of tools and machinery;
- find out if the job can be done with less skin contamination, for instance by using a brush to apply the substance;
- find out about the products you are using and the necessary protection such as gloves and aprons;





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- wash contaminated skin immediately to reduce the chance of ill effects;
- rinse and dry your hands thoroughly if your job requires you to have your hands frequently in water;
- use purpose made skin cleansers to remove oil and grease. Avoid turps, bleach or white spirit; they will dry the skin and may be absorbed into the body;
- use a reconditioning hand cream at the end of each shift.

People whose job keeps them outdoors for a significant part of their time may get more sun on their skin than is wise. Too much sunlight can be damaging - especially to people with sun sensitive types of skin. Excessive exposure can prematurely age the skin, leaving it wrinkled and leathery, and increase the chance of skin cancer in later life.

### **Keep covered up - skin can burn easily**

Other points to remember:

- keep your shirt or other top on especially around the middle of the day in the summer;
- wear a hat - a wide brimmed hat will shade your face and head;
- don't let yourself get burned - try to avoid the reddening that is the first sign of burning.



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## **Protect your lungs**

Short term effects from harmful substances that can be breathed into the body can include coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath. Long term exposure and even short term high exposures can lead to chronic disablement from diseases like occupational asthma.

Exposure to asbestos dust can lead to cancers of the chest and lungs. Construction and building maintenance workers, in particular, might be exposed to asbestos dust without realising it. If you discover any material or dust which you suspect contains asbestos, stop work and get advice. If you know you are working with an asbestos material find out what precautions you should take to protect your health and make sure you follow them.

Where feasible, exposure to substances which can cause lung diseases should be avoided by using a less harmful substance. Otherwise the most effective control methods should be used, with personal protective equipment as a last resort. So, make sure that:

- control measures (particularly local exhaust ventilation) are working properly and report any defects to your supervisor;
- you wear the respiratory protection that is provided and take care of it. For instance do not store contaminated gloves inside respirator helmets and always check the condition of the equipment before using it;





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- you co-operate with exposure monitoring and health surveillance procedures where they operate.

### **Protect your hearing**

Noise can be a problem in many different kinds of job. Any danger to hearing depends on how loud the noise is and how long you are exposed to it. As a general rule there might be a problem if you have to shout to be clearly heard by someone two metres away. There are many sources of loud noise. Common ones are powered hammering, chainsaw work, sheet metal working and wood machinery. Poor maintenance can also be a cause, for example holes in compressed air lines, escaping steam, cracked silencers or ill fitting enclosures.

*To avoid noise induced hearing loss:*

- use all the noise control equipment provided;
- tell your boss if something needs repairing;
- don't remove from a machine any equipment supplied for controlling noise;
- wear the ear protectors which should be provided where there is a risk to hearing;
- look after your ear protectors; use them properly, keep them clean and replace damaged muffs.



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## **Stress in your working life**

Stress can build up slowly and can be brought about by a variety of causes including pressures at home, work or both.

There are no unique symptoms but stress may be indicated by sleeplessness, loss of appetite, sudden feelings of panic, or irritability with your family or friends. It may be caused by long-standing problems or changes you think are beyond your control, eg financial problems, children changing schools, a new boss, an increased work load or a new job.

When people have difficulty coping with problems of this kind, pressure can build up and they may suffer stress. If this is prolonged or particularly intense it may eventually lead to mental ill health, heart or circulatory problems or other diseases.

*If you think you are suffering stress:*

- try and work out what is causing it;
- if work seems to be part of the problem, possible factors could be inappropriate work demands - particularly, not having sufficient personal control or discretion over your work; lack of support; or poor relationships with colleagues or your supervisors;
- talk over your problem with someone you trust;





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- try to identify ways of getting rid of or reducing some of the causes. If they seem work-related discuss them with your boss;
- reduce tension by finding out what helps you to relax and make time to do that every day.

## *Changes in your health*

These can range from the normal signs of ageing, like deterioration in eyesight, to the after effects of serious illness or accident. Whatever the change you may need to make adjustments at work:

- discuss your needs with your employer; this can reduce anxieties on both sides;
- talk over the possible adjustments that might help on a temporary or permanent basis; for example, after serious illness working flexible hours for a short time can help you back to normal working;
- your workstation may need to be adjusted if you have suffered a disabling injury;
- expert advice can be obtained from an occupational health service if available in your company. If not, free confidential advice is available from the Employment Medical Advisory Service of the Health and Safety Executive.



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## *Pregnancy and work*

Pregnancy is a natural state and should not be equated with ill health. Since the baby is most at risk during the first three months of pregnancy, expectant mothers should:

- seek advice about what precautions should be taken if there is a likelihood of exposure to infectious diseases at work eg for nurses, teachers or animal handlers;
- be sensible about lifting or standing for long periods;
- when seated, try and change posture frequently so as not to impede circulation;
- find out if their work is subject to specific health and safety legislation.

New and breast feeding mothers should also be aware of hazards in their workplace which present potential risks to their health and safety or to that of their baby.





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## *Further information*

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) produces a wide range of leaflets and guidance on occupational health issues.

### **Recommended further reading**

#### Noise

*Noise at Work - advice for employees* IND(G)99(L)(rev)1991 HSE

*Hear this!* - a pocket card on hearing protection IND(G)201(P) 1995 HSE

*Listen Up!* - why worry about noise? IND(G)122(L) 1992 HSE

#### Hand-arm vibration

*Hand-arm vibration - Advice on vibration white finger for employees and the self employed* IND(G)126(L) 1994 HSE

#### Visual Display Units

*Working with VDUs* IND(G)36(L) 1992 HSE

#### Respiratory sensitisers

*Breathe freely - a workers' information card on respiratory sensitisers* IND(G)172(L) 1994 HSE (also available in priced packs from HSE Books, ISBN 0 7176 0771 2)



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### Asbestos

*Asbestos alert* - a pocket card for building maintenance, repair and refurbishment workers IND(G)188(P) 1995 HSE

*Asbestos dust - essential advice for building maintenance, repair and refurbishment workers* IND(G)187(L) 1995 HSE

### UV radiation

*Keep your top on* IND(G)147(L) 1993 HSE, also available in Welsh IND(G)147(L)W from HSE's Cardiff area office, Brunel House, Fitzalan Road, Cardiff CF2 1SH

### Pregnancy and work

*Maternity rights - A guide for employers and employees* PL958 (rev 1) Department of Employment, available from Cambertown Ltd, Goldthorpe Industrial Estate, Goldthorpe, Rotherham, S63 7BL, Tel: 01709 888 688

*New and expectant mothers at work - A guide for employers (and employees)* HS (G)122 1994 HSE Books ISBN 0 7176 0826 3 (priced publication).

### 'Good Health is Good Business' campaign

Campaign Pack INSD(G)202





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Further advice on HSE publications may be obtained from HSE's Information Centre, Broad Lane, Sheffield S3 7HQ  
Tel: 0114 289 2345 Fax: 0114 289 2333

or from your local HSE area office, which is listed under Health and Safety Executive in the local telephone directory. The Employment Medical Advisory Service can be contacted through area offices.

HSE priced and free publications are available by mail order from:

HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 6FS  
Tel: 01787 881165 Fax: 01787 313995

HSE priced publications are also available from good booksellers.

Other enquiries should be directed to HSE's Information Centre (address and phone number above)



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Information and advice on occupational health issues can also be obtained from:

- your local authority environmental health officers. You can find their address and phone number in the phone book or through the Citizens Advice Bureau;
- your trade association, employer organisation and appropriate occupational health specialists

This leaflet is available in priced packs of 10 from HSE Books, ISBN 0 7176 1169 8. Single free copies are also available from HSE Books.

**This leaflet contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.**

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