

Hand-arm vibration

Advice for employees



What is hand-arm vibration?

Hand-arm vibration is vibration transmitted into your hands and arms when you use hand-held powered work equipment. Too much exposure to hand-arm vibration can cause hand-arm vibration syndrome (HAVS) and carpal tunnel syndrome.

What is hand-arm vibration syndrome?

- HAVS affects the nerves, blood vessels, muscles and joints of the hand, wrist and arm.
- It can become severely disabling if ignored.
- It includes vibration white finger, which can cause severe pain in the affected fingers.

What is carpal tunnel syndrome?

Carpal tunnel syndrome is a nerve disorder which may involve pain, tingling, numbness and weakness in parts

of the hand, and can be caused by, among other things, exposure to vibration.

What are the early signs and symptoms to look out for?

- Tingling and numbness in the fingers (which can cause sleep disturbance).
- Not being able to feel things with your fingers.
- Loss of strength in your hands (you may be less able to pick up or hold heavy objects).
- In the cold and wet, the tips of your fingers going white then red and being painful on recovery (vibration white finger).

If you continue to use high-vibration tools these symptoms will probably get worse, for example:

- the numbness in your hands could become permanent and you won't be able to feel things at all;

- you will have difficulty picking up small objects such as screws or nails;
- the vibration white finger could happen more frequently and affect more of your fingers.

When am I at risk?

You are at risk if you regularly use hand-held or hand-guided power tools and machines such as:

- concrete breakers, concrete pokers;
- sanders, grinders, disc cutters;
- hammer drills;
- chipping hammers;
- chainsaws, brush cutters, hedge trimmers, powered mowers;
- scabblers or needle guns.

You are also at risk if you hold workpieces which vibrate while being processed by powered machinery such as pedestal grinders.

How can I help reduce the risks?

It is your employer's responsibility to protect you against HAVS and carpal tunnel syndrome, but you should help by asking your employer if your job could be done in a different way without using vibrating tools and machines. If this cannot happen:

- Ask to use suitable low-vibration tools.
- Always use the right tool for each job (to do the job more quickly and expose you to less hand-arm vibration).
- Check tools before using them to make sure they have been properly maintained and repaired to avoid increased vibration caused by faults or general wear.
- Make sure cutting tools are kept sharp so that they remain efficient.
- Reduce the amount of time you use a tool in one go, by doing other jobs in between.

- Avoid gripping or forcing a tool or workpiece more than you have to.
- Store tools so that they do not have very cold handles when next used.
- Encourage good blood circulation by:
 - keeping warm and dry (when necessary, wear gloves, a hat, waterproofs and use heating pads if available);
 - giving up or cutting down on smoking because smoking reduces blood flow; and
 - massaging and exercising your fingers during work breaks.

What else can I do?

- Learn to recognise the early signs and symptoms of HAVS.
- Report any symptoms promptly to your employer or the person who does your health checks.
- Use any control measures your employer has put in place to reduce the risk of HAVS.
- Ask your trade union safety representative or employee representative for advice.

Help your employer to stop HAVS and carpal tunnel syndrome before they become a problem for you.

For more information on hand-arm vibration, see HSE's free leaflet *Control the risks from hand-arm vibration* INDG175(rev2) and visit HSE's vibration website at www.hse.gov.uk/vibration.

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

This pocket card is available in priced packs of 25 from HSE Books, ISBN 0 7176 6118 0. Single free copies are also available from HSE Books, Tel: 01787 881165.

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