These toolbox talks have been prepared by Constructing Better Health to raise awareness of the work related health issues you face on site.
So what is work related ill health?

It is something that you come into contact with or something which you do while you are at work which makes you ill.

Most of what will be covered, is not going to be new to you, but is stuff which generally is pushed to the backs of your minds to let you concentrate on getting the job done on time.

One of the reasons for talking about occupational health is that generally when we think about health and safety, we tend to focus on the safety side, this is partly because when someone has an accident, it is immediate, you can see the results straight away.

Where as ill health can sometimes take a long time in some cases as much as twenty or thirty years before symptoms start.
Dust or working with chemicals you can breathe in
Noise
Manual handling
Contact with skin irritants
Working with vibrating tools
Other things such as:
  - working in a dirty or contaminated environment
  - working with lead

These are all things that are common place on a construction site but if they are not controlled, and exposure is high, they can seriously affect your health.

Clearly manual handling is something you are all likely to do, and you are probably aware of the injuries it can cause if not done properly or reduced.

Also things such as working in a dirty or contaminated environment, can cause infections, working with lead if not controlled can make you ill.
Your employer has a duty of care to prevent you becoming ill through the work you do. They should carry out a risk assessment of the hazards and risks you may be exposed to, and implement control measures to prevent you becoming ill.

Firstly though they should look to eliminate the hazard or at substituting or reducing the hazard by changing the materials or the way in which you do the work.

They should also provide the correct equipment, i.e. mechanical lifting devices, provide you with information, instruction and training.

If any risk remains they should provide the correct personal protective equipment (PPE) and maybe start a health surveillance programme.
If you are still being exposed to the hazard, then in some cases they may have to provide you with work related health checks, which you may also hear called ‘health surveillance’.

Examples of where health checks may be needed are if your job involves working for periods of time with:

- vibrating tools
- Asbestos
- Lead
- skin irritants like cement
- certain types of dust, or
- if you are in a noisy environment, or
- doing a lot of manual handling

Also if your job involves safety critical work, which is work that if you suddenly became ill while doing it, could affect not only you but also others around you.
Your employer will normally arrange for an occupational health service provider to carry out the health checks, these are normally specially trained nurses or technicians

Some checks have to be done by a Doctor

In some cases, certain checks may be carried out by a manager or supervisor, for example to check your hands for signs of sore patches, in this case they must be specially trained
What happens during a health check?

You will be asked to give consent

You should be able to talk, in confidence

You will be asked to complete a questionnaire

What happens during a health check?

You will be asked to give consent for undergoing the health check and about what will happen to the information, this should be fully explained, but if you do not understand then ASK!

You should be able to talk, in confidence, without anyone over hearing

You will be asked to complete a questionnaire relevant to the type of health check you are having; to see if you may have noticed any symptoms. ASK if you need any help

The room used should be private, but don’t worry - you do not have to take your clothes off or ‘cough’!
The types of health checks done as part of a health surveillance programme have to be related to the type of work you are doing or the exposures you face. For example:

- excessive noise exposure is known to cause deafness, so a hearing test may be done
- A lung function test to check if your lungs are showing any signs of damage from what you may have breathed in
- A skin check, for any signs of dermatitis
- an assessment of any aches or pains you might have, or
- to check for signs of hand arm vibration syndrome, which can include vibration white finger if you use vibrating tools

As mentioned earlier if you do safety critical tasks it is important to check if you may have something that could cause a lapse in concentration, or you to collapse. So general health checks may be needed like:

- a blood pressure check
- a urine test for diabetes
- plus checks to make sure you can see and hear sufficiently
Why?

Because your employer has a duty of care to protect you from being made ill through your work.

Because you also have a duty to co-operate with your employer where your health or safety is concerned.

Because you cannot be allowed to just get ill and nothing be done.

By the workers health being monitored, the employer can also make sure the control measures that have been put in place are working.

Your employer has a duty to protect your health, but so do you!
Once it has been explained you will undertake the specific test. It is important to listen to the instructions as it may affect the result if you don’t do it right, ie

- **Hearing test (audiometry)** – this involves wearing special ear muffs and pressing a button when you hear it beep
- **Lung function test (spirometry)** – which involves blowing into a special tube, if you don’t do it as demonstrated it will give a false reading

It is really important that if you do not understand the instruction you should ask.
Your manager will only get told what health surveillance has been done and when, and whether any restrictions are recommended.

They will be told if a referral to an OH Doctor is advisable – they may need to make that referral.

Also when the health checks should be repeated and if the control measures need reviewing.

They will not be told any medical stuff, it is totally a need to know basis, ie they need to know if you are fit to do the tasks and if your work has affected your health.
If they do find something not quite right firstly don’t panic, it could have been poor technique.

They may though, advise that you visit your GP or practice nurse or they may suggest you see an Occupational Health Doctor if it is related to your work.

They may suggest certain restrictions on the tasks you do, i.e. how long you should work with vibrating tools, or to make sure you always wear your PPE.

It may be that your employer, or site manager is advised to review the control measures that are in place to prevent further damage if it is work related.

Remember there are certain employment laws in place that can protect an employee, as far ‘as is reasonably practicable’, from losing their job due to ill health.
What if they find something wrong?

If available, and with your employer’s agreement, you may benefit from:

» A phased return to work
» Altered hours
» Amended duties
» Workplace adaptations
So to summarise there are many things that can make you ill on a construction site – be aware of them and what you should do.

You should also attend the tool box talks related to the hazards you work with.

Speak to your manager about any concerns you have or contact CBH in confidence for impartial advice.

Go and speak to your GP about any worries you have with your health – the sooner it is picked up the better chance there is of treating it.
So who are CBH and how are CBH going about this with employers?

CBH has set the National Minimum standards for occupational health, which have been fully endorsed by the HSE, the Health and Safety Executive, so that your employer knows about the health risks and what he or she should do to prevent them harming you, like what health checks to arrange.

CBH have developed a national programme which enables the Occupational Health Advisor (OHA) to upload your health check results, so your health can be properly monitored by occupational health throughout your working life, and react promptly if anything goes wrong.

By issuing you with a CBH card or CBH number your employer can have a look at what recommendations the OHA has made to make sure you are properly protected especially if you are already showing some sign of a work-related health problem. THEY CANNOT ACCESS ANY MEDICAL INFORMATION!

You may know that under the CDM Regs a site manager has to make sure your occupational health is being looked after, so a site manager can also make this check, if they are not your employer though they won’t see the recommendations, just that it is being done. If however you do any safety critical work and there is anything they should know about to protect not only you but others working with you, they will get that information – so you can be assured that the crane operator on site isn’t likely to suddenly collapse! The same for anything to do with statutory medicals, like asbestos or lead.