



What is occupational health?

*Occupational health is concerned with the protection and promotion of the physical and mental health and wellbeing of people at work. It focuses on **the impact of work on health**: how does work and the work environment affect the health of the workforce? And **the impact of health on work**: how does an employee's health affect their ability to do their job?*

An Occupational health nurse (OHN) is a registered nurse, (RNA or RNMH) working in the field of occupational health. They may have an additional qualification, often at master's level or higher. They may be registered as a Specialist Community Public Health Nurse (SPCHN(OH)) on Part 3 of the NMC register.

OH nurses have a unique and multidimensional role, working with individuals and organisations to enable them to achieve their best possible outcomes and to fulfill legal and other obligations. They often work alongside other health professionals and specialists including [OH physicians](#), [ergonomists](#), [occupational hygienists](#), [physiotherapists](#), [psychologists](#) and [counsellors](#).

OHNs may also work with OH technicians, who are not qualified nurses. OH technicians can undertake certain OH activities, particularly health surveillance and health assessment, working to specified standards and under the direction and supervision of an OH professional.

Good OH provision is an asset, not a financial burden. It can enable employers to fulfill their legal obligations, reduce sickness absence, improve work effectiveness and productivity and can support a healthy workplace culture to increase organisational success. For more evidence, see the [SMM publication](#).

What do OH nurses do?

OH nurses have four main spheres of activity which overlap and interact to support workforce health and wellbeing. The particular priorities and the proportion of time spent on different activities will vary with individual expertise, the nature of the business and the specific requirements of an organisation.

What do OH nurses do?

OH nurses can:

- Provide an independent assessment of an individual's fitness for work in relation to the requirements of the role and any ill-health, injury or disability
- Advise on how to facilitate return to work or enable an individual to continue in work e.g. phased return following absence, workplace adjustments
- Provide training and support for managers in relation to employees' fitness for work
- Carry out fitness-for-task assessments where roles or industries have particular demands (e.g. transport, offshore work, clinical health care)
- Support drug and alcohol testing and policy development
- Help managers and employers to meet their legal requirements with regard to the Equalities Act

OH nurses are not:

- Responsible for managing individuals and their sickness absence
- Responsible for implementing management actions
- Able to provide health related information or opinions without informed consent from the individual involved

Assessing and enhancing fitness for work: advising on the impact of ill health and physical & mental capacity on an individual's fitness for work

OH nurses can:

- Assess workplace health risks (e.g. stress, DSE and manual handling hazards, dust and chemical hazards, biological hazards, vibration, noise) and advise on possible control measures, working with other professionals where necessary
- Carry out workplace monitoring including statutory health surveillance where required e.g. for exposure to hazardous substances, noise or vibration
- Advise on work-related immunisation requirements, and provide immunisation in some settings
- Provide support and training in relation to health risk management and responsibilities under H&S legislation

OH nurses are not:

- Responsible for the day-to-day management of workplace hazards

Health risk management: assessing, controlling and monitoring workplace health risks

Strategic health leadership: helping organisations to understand and enhance the health of their working population

OH nurses can:

- Assess the health needs of a workforce
- Develop health and wellbeing related strategy and policies
- Work with others at a senior level to influence organisational direction
- Provide or support training to upskill other managers and leaders
- Provide quality assurance of occupational health services

Promoting good health: creating a culture in which employees can thrive at work, promoting healthy lifestyle choices and building resilience

OH nurses can:

- Support evidence-based health promotion activities to influence lifestyle risks e.g. smoking, alcohol and drugs, physical activity, healthy eating, common mental health conditions and public health conditions
- Advise on employer interventions to support workforce health

OH nurses are not:

- Focused on general health and lifestyle change at the expense of work-related issues
- Providers of medical treatment, although they may provide urgent health care or injury advice in some settings such as construction or offshore