

Safe and healthy at work with the help of the occupational physician



What exactly is the role of the occupational physician? For which health checks should you visit him/her? And what about your right of privacy?

What is an occupational physician?

An occupational physician is a doctor who has specialised in occupational medicine and occupational health care. As a medical expert, he/she focuses on the relationship between work and health: he/she protects the health of employees in relation to their job and working conditions. Some companies have their own occupational physicians, also called company doctors. Most, however, rely on the occupational health expertise of an External Service for Prevention and Protection at Work (ESPP).

What does the occupational physician do?

Determine whether you are medically fit to perform your job

While your general practitioner (GP) determines if you are generally able to work, the occupational physician will check your actual suitability to perform your specific job and tasks. He/she does everything in his/her power to prevent your health from deteriorating in any way as a result of your work. If necessary, he/she will suggest an adjustment to the work place.

Assist companies in their risk assessment

In particular, the occupational physician helps the company take measures to prevent health hazards for employees: prevention of accidents and occupational diseases, measures against infectious diseases, preventing an employee from posing a danger to colleagues, etc.

Participate in meetings of the Committee for Prevention and Protection at Work

In addition to the employer, the committee also represents employees. Topics relating to well-being are discussed during the meetings.

Ensure the health surveillance of employee

✓ The recruitment health check or the preliminary health assessment

WHAT IS IT? A health check before you start your new job.

WHO IS IT FOR? Employees for whom a health check is required by law, such as persons with a safety function, a function requiring a high level of alertness or a function with exposure to specific risks.

✓ Periodic health surveillance

WHAT IS IT? A recurring check, whose frequency is determined by the risks of the job.

WHO IS IT FOR? All employees covered by the statutory health surveillance scheme.

✓ Specific health surveillance

WHAT IS IT? Health surveillance for specific profiles.

WHO IS IT FOR? Employees with a disability, youth, interns, temporary workers, drivers and female employees during pregnancy, after childbirth and during lactation.

✓ Spontaneous consultation

WHAT IS IT? A check requested by the employee.

WHO IS IT FOR? Employees with work-related medical queries or complaints.

✓ Continued health surveillance

WHAT IS IT? Additional medical follow-up after termination of a function with exposure to chemical, biological or physical agents.

WHO IS IT FOR? In specific circumstances, employees may continue to be monitored medically once they have ceased to perform a function involving exposure to chemical, biological or physical agents.

✓ Health check upon resuming work

WHAT IS IT? Health check after a period of more than four consecutive weeks of incapacity for work to see if you can resume your functions.

WHO IS IT FOR? Employees for whom health surveillance applies.

✓ Visit prior to resumption of work

WHAT IS IT? During a period of long-term illness, you can, as an employee, make the decision to consult the occupational physician if you plan to resume work. He/she will discuss the necessary adjustments with you, your general practitioner and the medical counselor of the health insurance fund to facilitate your return to work.

WHO IS IT FOR? Employees who are ill for a long time.

✓ Health check in the context of reintegration

WHAT IS IT? A health check that is part of the reintegration process of an employee who has been ill for a long time. The doctor will determine if you:

- will eventually be able to resume your usual job;
- can perform other tasks temporarily or definitively at your employer.

WHO IS IT FOR? Employees who have been ill a long time and are in a reintegration process.

Advise the employer

The occupational physician makes recommendations on general hygiene, the prevention of occupational diseases and industrial accidents, the protection against harmful agents, maternity protection, the organisation of first aid, health, and any adjustments to the work place or the task package.

WHAT IS IT THAT THE OCCUPATIONAL PHYSICIAN DOESN'T DO?

The occupational physician is not the “boss's doctor”. As a doctor, he/she acts neutrally and takes his/her decisions in all impartiality. He/she may only perform those health checks that are necessary for the evaluation of your suitability as an employee for a particular function.

Consequently, he/she will not:

- suggest a treatment or prescribe medicines, or declare you incapacitated. This is something your GP or the doctor in the hospital should do.
- perform general preventive medical procedures (e.g. do a smear test or check your cholesterol level). For that, too, you should visit your GP.
- decide whether or not you are able to resume work. This is the responsibility of the doctor-inspector.



How does the occupational physician deal with you, the employer and other healthcare providers?

Privacy

Whether an occupational physician belongs to an internal or external service is irrelevant. He/she must always respect medical confidentiality and make his/her decisions independently of the employer. Your employer does not have access to your medical file. After a health check, the occupational physician will decide whether or not you are fit to perform your tasks. Even though he/she will share this decision with the employer, he/she will never mention any disease or condition in your health assessment.

Collaborative work

The occupational physician regularly consults with other doctors and caregivers. This is certainly important when preparing for work resumption after a long-term absence. In principle, the occupational physician will ask for permission before contacting other physicians.

Complaints about the occupational physician? Or you don't agree with his/her decision?

If you are not satisfied with the manner in which the occupational physician does his/her job, you can file a complaint with your employer or the external service that employs the occupational physician. Or maybe you don't agree with the occupational physician's decision? If so, you can lodge an appeal with the physician-labour inspector. The labour inspectorate is organised regionally. The right address can be found at the back of the health assessment form or on the FPS ELSD website.