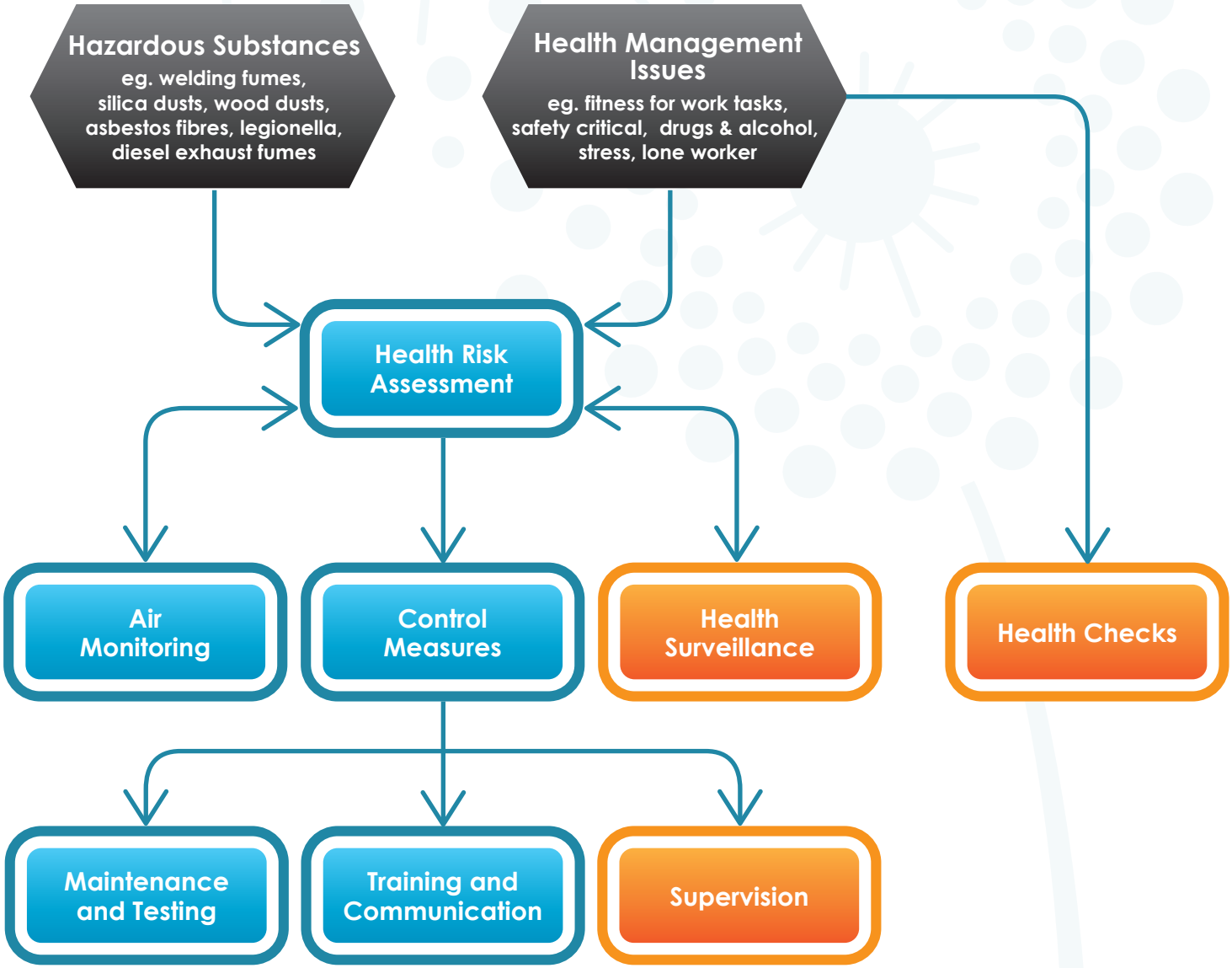
BREATHE FREELY

Controlling Exposures to prevent occupational lung disease in the construction industry

BOHS
The Chartered Society for Worker Health Protection

What can an occupational hygienist help with?

Managing health risks in the workplace may require input from different health professionals. The purpose of the diagram below is to show where an occupational hygienist may be able to help.



Hazard/Issue

An occupational hygienist can help you do this*

Other health professionals would typically do this

*This is not intended to suggest that a qualified occupational hygienist is always necessary for all of these tasks, all of the time.

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Protecting workers' health in construction

The construction industry in the UK has made great strides in managing safety and reducing the incidence of serious injury and fatalities over the past ten to fifteen years. Since 2001 when the then-Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott laid down the challenge in the Construction Safety Summit, the number of fatalities has fallen by two thirds, thanks to the great efforts and achievements of everyone in the industry.

Health risks have not received the same amount of attention. There are many reasons for this including the fact that the consequences of exposure to harmful substances is often not visible, symptoms may be delayed by decades from first exposure, and the burden of managing health falls predominantly to the employer.

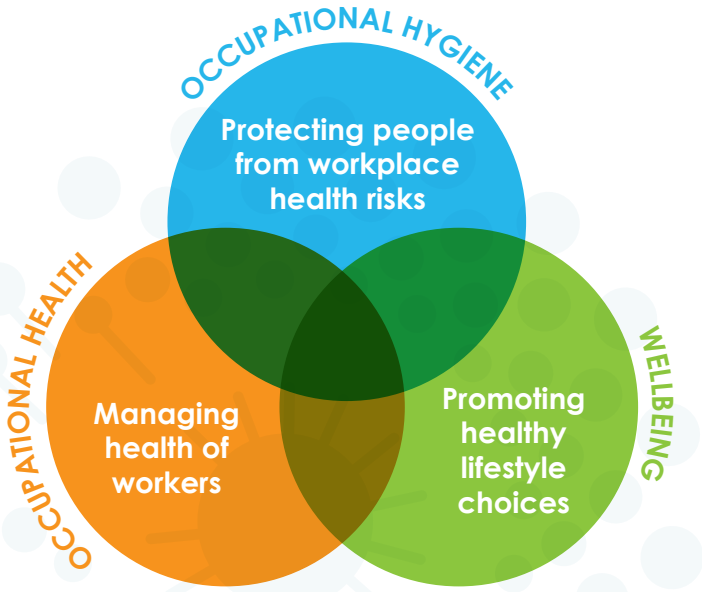
HSE estimates that in 2014, 76,000 people whose current or most recent job was in construction suffered from an illness caused or made worse by the job they did. Every week 100 people die from construction-related ill-health in the UK.

Managing health risks

Occupational disease and illness can be prevented - it is possible for construction work to be carried out without causing ill-health, provided risks are properly eliminated, managed and controlled. This requires a concerted effort by everyone, to recognise the hazards to health, evaluate the degree of exposure, and implement effective and reliable control measures. Health risks should be managed as part of an overall system to prevent or control health and safety risks.

Different terms are used within the industry to describe separate elements of the 'health' part of health and safety, which causes some confusion.

"Occupational health", "occupational hygiene", and "wellbeing/health promotion" are distinct but overlapping disciplines that should complement each other and work together in a multidisciplinary approach, as depicted in the diagram.



OCCUPATIONAL HYGIENE is the science-based discipline aimed at identifying and preventing exposure to harmful substances in the workplace, such as asbestos and cement dusts, welding fumes and gases, and spray-painting mists. Occupational hygienists help employers to control the risks by designing out the hazards, applying engineering controls to reduce exposure to the minimum, using administrative measures to minimise risk, selecting appropriate PPE, or a combination of these.

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH is the term used in the construction industry for managing the effect of work on the health of individual employees, and the effect an employee's health may have on his/her work. It is a two-way process. Occupational health service providers offer a range of services delivered by specialist staff. They contribute to risk assessments and carry out other services such as fitness for work, medicals, health surveillance, rehabilitation and drug and alcohol screening to pick up health issues.

WELLBEING is about being contented and comfortable with your quality of life, psychologically, physically and socially. Good occupational health practice recognises that, as work forms such a large part of many people's lives and therefore affects overall wellbeing, promoting and maintaining the wellbeing of employees within their workplaces can improve productivity, commitment and attendance in return.

Protecting workers' health in construction is a big challenge for all in the industry. Specialist help may be needed at all stages to identify health hazards, evaluate risks, control exposures, manage individual health issues, and promote health and wellbeing at work. Understanding what each discipline brings to the table and how they complement each other is vital to achieve a reduction in incidence of work-related disease to equal that gained in major injuries and fatalities.