HAVS Testing and Employer Duties: A Practical UK Compliance Guide

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What Is HAVS and Who Is at Risk?

Hand-arm vibration syndrome, usually shortened to HAVS, is a painful and disabling condition caused by regular and prolonged exposure to vibration from powered hand tools and equipment. It damages the blood vessels, nerves and joints of the hands and arms. The early signs are often dismissed as nothing more than tired hands: tingling, numbness or pins and needles in the fingers after a day's work. Left unmanaged, the condition can progress to loss of grip strength, reduced dexterity, and attacks of finger blanching (sometimes called vibration white finger) triggered by cold or damp conditions.

Occupational health professionals grade HAVS using a recognised clinical scale, from mild tingling through to advanced disease that interferes with everyday tasks such as doing up buttons. HAVS is largely preventable through proper risk management, but once nerve and vascular damage has occurred it is often permanent. This is why the regulations focus on controlling exposure before symptoms appear, rather than reacting once someone reports a problem.

Anyone who regularly operates powered hand tools, or who holds a workpiece against a vibrating machine, may be at risk. Typical high-exposure tools include angle grinders, sanders, hammer drills, breakers, chainsaws, strimmers, impact wrenches and scabblers. Exposure is particularly common in construction, groundworks and demolition, and across manufacturing and engineering workshops where grinding, fettling and assembly are part of daily production. Lighter tools used for

long, continuous periods can produce a comparable daily exposure to heavier ones.

The Legal Framework

The Control of Vibration at Work Regulations 2005 place specific duties on employers, in addition to the general risk assessment duty under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. The regulations set two thresholds based on daily exposure, expressed as an eight-hour energy-equivalent frequency-weighted acceleration:

- **The exposure action value (EAV)** is 2.5 metres per second squared (A(8)). Where daily exposure is likely to reach this level, you must reduce exposure as far as is reasonably practicable.
- **The exposure limit value (ELV)** is 5.0 metres per second squared (A(8)). Employees must not be exposed above this limit. If it is exceeded, you must act immediately to bring exposure below it and find out why it happened.

To comply, an employer needs a proper vibration risk assessment that identifies which tasks and tools expose staff to vibration, estimates daily exposure using manufacturer vibration data combined with realistic trigger times, and sets out the controls in place. The assessment is not a one-off exercise. It needs reviewing whenever a new tool is introduced or work patterns change, and at a sensible routine interval, often annually, to confirm that the controls are still adequate and the estimates still reflect what happens on site.

Controlling the Risk

Good control starts further up the hierarchy than personal protective equipment. The first question should be whether the vibrating task is necessary at all, or whether a different method of work can remove it, such as using pre-cut materials instead of cutting on site. Where the tool is genuinely needed, choose the lowest-vibration option that will still do the job properly. Then keep tools well maintained, since worn bearings, blunt blades and poorly balanced discs can all increase vibration output significantly.

Job rotation and trigger time limits are the practical measures most workplaces rely on day to day. Rather than one person using a grinder for hours at a time, exposure can be shared across a team so that no individual approaches the exposure action value. Keeping hands warm, encouraging a relaxed grip and allowing short breaks all help, though they support, rather than replace, reducing exposure at source.

- Choose tools with the lowest manufacturer-declared vibration figures suitable for the job
- Maintain tools on a planned schedule, not just when they fail
- Set and enforce daily trigger time limits per person, per tool
- Rotate tasks so no one individual carries the full daily exposure
- Keep a record of actual usage patterns so exposure estimates stay realistic

Health Surveillance: What "HAVS Testing" Actually Involves

Where employees are regularly exposed above the exposure action value, or your risk assessment shows they are otherwise at risk of ill health from vibration, the regulations require health surveillance. This is often loosely called HAVS testing, but it is a staged process rather than a single test. It usually begins with a questionnaire for new starters and a screening questionnaire each year. A more detailed assessment by a suitably trained person follows where symptoms are reported, checking things such as grip strength, sensation and circulation. Where symptoms are present or progressing, the employee is referred to a doctor with occupational health training, who can diagnose the condition and advise on fitness to continue working with vibrating tools.

This surveillance should be arranged with an occupational health provider, because competent clinical oversight is central to spotting early-stage HAVS before it becomes disabling. It is also useful feedback, not just a legal requirement. If several people using the same tool show early symptoms, that points to a control that is not working, whether it is tool condition, trigger time or an exposure estimate that was too optimistic.

Frequency matters. New starters in vibration-exposed roles should have a baseline assessment before they start, followed by surveillance at regular intervals, usually at least annually, and sooner if symptoms are reported or exposure increases. Employees with early signs of HAVS may need more frequent monitoring and, in some cases, redeployment away from vibrating tools while the condition is managed.

Records to Keep

Good record keeping turns a vibration policy on paper into something you can demonstrate if challenged. As a minimum, keep the vibration risk assessment itself, including how exposure figures were calculated and when it was last reviewed, a log of the controls introduced for each task or tool, and maintenance records showing that tools are kept in good working order. Health surveillance records should be kept confidentially, usually by the occupational health provider, with the employer holding a record of fitness to continue work and any recommended actions rather than the full clinical detail.

Because HAVS can develop slowly, historical exposure records can matter years later if a former employee develops symptoms, so keep them well beyond the end of employment where you can. Trigger time logs, tool vibration data sheets and training records for people who use vibrating equipment should sit in the same file, so an inspector, insurer or auditor can see the full picture in one place.

Common Mistakes and What Good Looks Like

The most frequent failing is a vibration risk assessment that was done once, years ago, using generic manufacturer figures, and never revisited as tools were replaced or work patterns changed. Another common gap is treating health surveillance as a box-ticking annual form instead of feeding the results back into the risk assessment. Employers also sometimes assume that gloves marketed as "anti-vibration" meaningfully reduce exposure; in practice they offer limited protection and

should never be relied on as a primary control.

A compliant arrangement looks like this: an up-to-date risk assessment that is reviewed regularly, tool-by-tool trigger time limits that are actually followed on site, an evidenced maintenance schedule, health surveillance arranged with a competent occupational health provider, and a manager or supervisor who understands enough about the regulations to spot when something has drifted. Supervisors often benefit from a broader grounding in risk management through a course such as IOSH Managing Safely, which helps them manage vibration alongside other workplace hazards rather than in isolation.

How Integral Safety Can Help

Our health and safety consultancy service helps employers across Leicestershire and the wider East Midlands put a vibration risk assessment together, review existing controls, and check that trigger time limits and tool maintenance records stand up to scrutiny. We can also audit your current vibration arrangements as part of a wider health and safety review, and point you towards an occupational health provider for the health surveillance itself. If you operate from Coalville, Leicester or anywhere across the East Midlands, get in touch to talk through your vibration exposure and what a compliant arrangement should look like for your business. Contact us to arrange a conversation.

Talk to Integral Safety Ltd

We are health and safety consultants based in Coalville, Leicestershire, working with businesses across the East Midlands. If anything in this guide applies to your workplace, we can help.

Phone	01530 382 150 or 01664 400 450
Email	info@integralsafetyltd.co.uk
Website	integralsafetyltd.co.uk

This guide is general information about UK health and safety law and practice, correct as at 11 November 2026. It is not advice on your particular circumstances. The latest version is at https://integralsafetyltd.co.uk/blog/hand-arm-vibration-syndrome-havs-employer-duties-and-testing.