Occupational Health Referral: A Guide for Managers

1. Purpose of Occupational Health Referrals

Occupational Health (OH) referrals allow employers to access expert medical advice to support employees with health issues impacting their ability to work.

Referrals ensure legal compliance, help maintain a safe working environment, and support employee wellbeing and retention.

2. When to Refer an Employee

Consider referring an employee to OH in the following circumstances:

- Frequent or long-term sickness absence
- Concerns about the employee's fitness for work
- The need to explore reasonable adjustments
- Concerns about an employee's ability to safely perform their duties
- To support return-to-work planning after illness or injury

3. How to Make a Referral

Discuss with the Employee:

- Explain the reason for the referral.
- Ensure the employee understands the purpose and benefits of OH input.

Obtain Written Consent (Two-Step Process):

- Referral Consent: You must obtain written consent from the employee to refer them to OH. Without this, the referral cannot proceed. (Please see the form in resources if you do not have a company one)
- Report Release Consent: Separate written consent must be obtained for the release of the OH report to HR or management. The employee has the right to view the report before it is shared. Occupational Health normally request this from the employee.

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Complete the Referral Form:

- Use clear, objective language—avoid assumptions or emotive language.
- Include relevant factual background: absence dates, performance concerns, duties.
- Clearly state what information you require from OH (e.g., fitness for work, potential adjustments, prognosis).
- Pre-documented Questions: Many referral forms include standard questions. Review and edit these to ensure relevance to the case.
- Additional Questions: Add any specific, relevant questions you wish OH to address—these should relate strictly to the employee's ability to perform their job.
  - These should be limited to no more than 3 additional questions. Overloading the referral with extra questions can dilute the focus. Occupational Health professionals are best placed to determine relevant clinical lines of enquiry based on a concise, well-structured referral.

Send Referral:

- Submit the completed referral form to the OH team.

<u>What Happens After Referral</u>

- The OH team arranges an assessment with the employee (usually 30–60 minutes).
- OH produces a written report with recommendations (functional focus only).
- HR and the manager receive the report (subject to employee consent).
- A meeting is held with the employee to review outcomes and next steps.

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5. Using the OH Report

- Assess whether any recommendations are reasonable and practical.
- Consider adjustments (e.g., duties, hours, environment) based on the advice.
- Keep communication open and document any actions taken.
- Review progress and re-refer if health needs change.

6. Legal and Ethical Considerations

- Equality Act 2010: Duty to make reasonable adjustments.
- GDPR 2018: Handle medical information with strict confidentiality.
- Access to Medical Reports Act 1988: Employee rights to access reports.
- HSE Guidance: Ensure safe, supportive working conditions.

7. Best Practice for HR and Managers

- Act early and supportively when health concerns arise.
- Use clear, non-judgmental, and factual language in referrals.
- Tailor questions on the referral form to gather meaningful, work-related insights.
- Maintain confidentiality and store documents securely.
- Involve the employee throughout the process.
- Ensure follow-up actions are timely and well documented.