Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development
LABOR STANDARDS AND SAFETY DIVISION

PHYSICAL AGENT DATA SHEET (PADS) - HAND-ARM VIBRATION

Description

Hand-arm vibration is caused by the use of vibrating hand-held tools, such as pneumatic jack hammers, drills, gas powered chain saws, and electrical tools such as grinders. The nature of these tools involves vibration (a rapid back and forth type of motion) which is transmitted from the tool to the hands and arms of the person holding the tool.

Health Hazards

Vibration Syndrome and Vibration-Induced White Finger (VWF) are the major health hazards related to the use of vibrating tools. Carpal Tunnel Syndrome is another health problem that has been linked in one study to the use of smaller hand-held vibrating tools.

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Vibration Syndrome

Vibration Syndrome is a group of symptoms related to the use of vibrating tools and includes -some or all of the following: muscle weakness, muscle fatigue, pain in the arms and shoulders, and vibration-induced white finger. Many researchers believe that other symptoms--headaches, irritability, depression, forgetfulness, and sleeping problems--should also be included in descriptions of Vibration Syndrome.

Vibration-Induced White Finger

Vibration-Induced White Finger (VWF), also known as "Dead Finger" or "Dead Hand" is the result of impaired circulation (poor blood supply in the fingers, caused by the prolonged use of vibrating tools. VWF may appear after only several months on the job, or may not appear until twenty to forty years on the job.

The harmful health effects of vibrating tools are related to the length of time that a worker has been using vibrating tools and to the frequency of the vibration (how fast the tool goes back and forth). The longer a person uses a vibrating tool, and the faster the tool vibrates, the greater the risk of health effects. The length of the initial symptom-free period of vibration exposure (i.e., from first exposure to the first appearance of a white finger) is known as the latent interval. It is related to the intensity of the vibration - the shorter the latent period, the more severe the resulting VWF if vibration exposure continues.

Temporary tingling or numbness during or soon after use of a vibrating hand tool is not considered to be VWF, however tingling and numbness in the fingers lasting more than an hour after finishing work may indicate early stages of VWF. Table 1 lists the stages that Vibration White Finger may progress through if exposure continues.

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Table 1
Stages of Vibration White Finger
(Taylor-Pelmear System)

Stage	Condition of Fingers	Work & Social Interference
00	No tingling, numbness or blanching of fingers	No complaints
OT	Intermittent tingling	No interference with activities
ON	Intermittent numbness	No interference with activities
TN	Intermittent tingling and numbness	No interference with activities
1	Blanching of a fingertip with or without tingling and/or numbness	No interference with activities
2	Blanching of one or more fingers beyond tips, usually during winter	Possible interference with activities outside work, no interference at work

3	Extensive blanching of fingers; frequent episodes in both summer and winter	Definite interference at work, at home, and with social activities; restriction of hobbies
4	Extensive blanching of most fingers; frequent episodes in both summer and winter	Occupation usually changed because of severity of signs and symptoms

The technical name for VWF is Raynaud's Syndrome of Occupational Origin. Raynaud's Syndrome may also occur in people who do not use vibrating hand-held tools. Several different kinds of medical illnesses can cause Raynaud's Syndrome. Raynaud's Syndrome also appears in some people who are otherwise entirely healthy.

It is important that people with Raynaud's Syndrome avoid the extensive use of vibrating tools because they can develop the most severe complications of VWF very quickly.

Many of the symptoms of Vibration Syndrome will disappear shortly after a worker stops using the types of tools which transmit vibration to the hands and arms. Fatigue and muscular pain in the arms and shoulders will generally disappear. In the early stages, if a worker stops using vibrating tools, VWF will not get any worse and may get slightly better.

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (CTS) is a group of symptoms in the hand which arise from pressure on one of the nerves which passes through the palm side of the wrist. The early symptoms are similar to the early symptoms of white finger and consist of tingling in the fingers. For the most part only the thumb, index, and middle fingers are affected in CTS. Later, symptoms can progress to numbness. Pain in the wrist and fingers may also develop. CTS may occur in people using small hand tools like pneumatic screwdrivers. Carpal Tunnel Syndrome also occurs among people having repetitive motion of the wrist or fingers, such as using a cash register, or picking fish from a net; or with forceful motion of the wrist, such as in using a wrench. Pinching or flexing with the wrist bent upwards, downwards, or sideways increases the occurrence of CTS.

The symptoms of CTS are frequently worse at night and a person may be awakened from sleep by pain or the feeling of pins and needles in fingers, hand or wrist.

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome may improve if diagnosed in the early stages and exposure to the type of activity which caused it is stopped. In moderate cases most of the symptoms of CTS can be relieved by a surgical operation which relieves the pressure on the nerve which causes the CTS symptoms. If the

surgery is performed too late, only some of the symptoms may be relieved. In very severe cases the symptoms are irreversible and may include weakness of the hand due to loss of muscle function.

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Preventing Hand-Arm Vibration Diseases

Job Modification to Reduce Vibration Exposure

Wherever possible, jobs should be redesigned to minimize the use of hand-held vibrating tools. Where job redesign is not feasible, ways to reduce tool vibration should be found. Where practical, substitute a manual tool for a vibrating tool. Whenever possible, high vibration tools should be replaced by improved, low vibration tools designed to absorb vibration before it reaches the handgrip.

Determine vibration exposure times and introduce work breaks to avoid constant, continued vibration exposure. A worker who is using a vibrating tool continuously should take a 10 minute break after each hour of using the tool.

Medical Evaluation

Workers whose occupations place them at risk for developing VWF should have pre-employment physicals and thereafter should be checked at least annually by doctors who know about the diagnosis and treatment of VWF. Diagnostic tests which can be used include plethysmography, arteriography, skin thermography, and sensory tests,, such as two point discrimination depth sense, pinprick touch and temperature sensation. X-rays may also be useful.

Workers that have a past history of abnormalities in blood circulation and especially workers who have Raynaudis Syndrome should not be permitted to use vibrating hand-held tools. Workers who have moderate to severe symptoms of VWF should be reassigned to work which removes them from further direct exposure to vibrating tools.

If workers develop symptoms of tingling or numbness, or if their fingers occasionally become white or blue, or painful especially when cold, they should be examined by a doctor who knows about the diagnosis and treatment of VWF and CTS.

Work Practices

Workers using vibrating hand-held tools should wear multiple layers of warm gloves and should wear anti-vibration gloves whenever possible. Before starting the job, warm the hands. This is especially important when it is cold. workers using vibrating tools should not allow the hands to become chilled. If the hands of a worker using vibrating tools become wet or chilled, he should dry them and put on dry,

warm gloves before resuming exposure to vibration. Workers exposed to cold should dress adequately to keep the whole body warm because low body temperature can make a worker more susceptible to VWF.

A worker using a vibrating hand-held tool should let the tool do the work by grasping it as lightly as possible, consistent with safe work practice. The tighter the tool is held, the more vibration is transmitted to the fingers and hand. The tool should rest on a support or on the workpiece as much as possible. The tool should be operated only when necessary and at the minimum speed (and impact force) to reduce vibration exposure.

Tools should be regularly maintained to keep vibration to a minimum. Keeping chisels and chainsaws sharp, for example, will reduce vibration. Using new grinder wheels will also reduce vibration.

Education

Employees who use or will be using vibrating hand-held tools should receive training about the hazards of vibration and they should be taught how to minimize the ill effects of vibration.

Smokers are much more susceptible to VWF that non-smokers, and the VWF in smokers is usually more severe, therefore workers who use vibrating hand-held tools should not smoke.

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Recommended Exposure Limits

Table 2 contains the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH) recommendations on the limits for exposure of the hand to vibration.

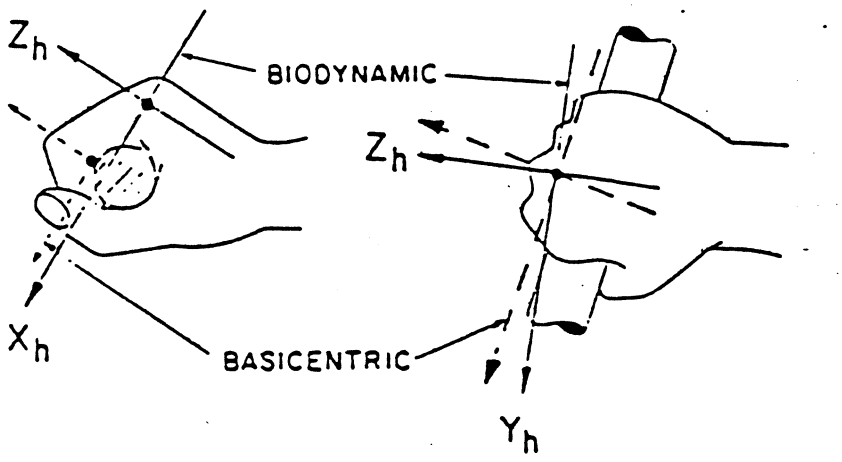
Table 2 Threshold Limit Values for Exposure of the Hand to Vibration in Either X_h, Y_h, Z_h, Directions		
Total Daily Exposure Duration[a]	Values of the Dominant,[b] Frequency-Weighted, rms, Component Acceleration Which Shall Not be Exceeded a_k, (a_{keg})	
	m/s^2	g[c]

4 hours and less than 8	4	0.40
2 hours and less than 4	6	0.61
1 hour and less than 2	8	0.81
less than 1 hour	12	1.22

[a] The total time vibration enters the hand per day, whether continuously or intermittently.

[b] Usually one axis of vibration is dominant over the remaining two axes. If one or more vibration axes exceeds the Total Daily Exposure then the TLV has been exceeded.

[c] g = 9.81 m/s . d



Biodynamic and basicentric coordinate systems for the hand, showing the directions of the acceleration components (ISO 5349 and ANSI S3.34-1986).

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