Are You Getting Bad Vibes from Your Tools?



WHAT’S AT STAKE

Millions of workers in North America use vibrating tools, such as drills, jackhammers, grinders or chainsaws. And many of these workers are at risk of developing hand-arm vibration syndrome (HAVS), a condition that affects the circulatory, nervous and musculoskeletal systems.

WHAT’S THE DANGER

Regular and frequent exposure to vibration from tools can permanently damage your fingers and hands. At first there’s a whitening of the fingertips, when the blood vessels collapse. As the skin and muscle tissue don’t get the oxygen they need, they eventually die. Early symptoms of HAVS include pain, numbness, tingling and loss of dexterity in the hand. Symptoms can become so severe that the worker is forced to change trades. If not addressed, HAVS can lead to the permanent loss of the use of hands.

EXAMPLE

George, a former mechanic technician, was forced into early retirement due to tissue damage to his hands. Not only did HAVS affect his ability to work, it affected his day-to-day living. Unable to grip with his fingers and thumbs, even the most basic tasks, such as writing, fishing or just holding a cup of coffee, are difficult and painful. It’s even worse in the cold months.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Some factors can increase your risk of HAVS, including:

- The tool’s vibration levels,
- How long you use the tool each day and for how many months or years you’ve used it,
- How strongly you grip the tool, and
- How much force you apply to the tool.

Cold conditions and tobacco smoke can also reduce the blood supply to your hands and fingers, increasing your risk of developing HAVS.

These tips can help you minimize the effects of vibration from tools:

- Choose tools that require minimal force to operate or that include anti-vibration or shock-absorbing devices.
- Maintain tools so they will run as smoothly as possible.
- Use handle coatings that suppress vibration, but be sure that the coating doesn’t increase the size of the handle and require a tighter grip.
- Keep a loose grip on the tool and use only as much force as is necessary. Let the tool do the work. The stronger the grip, the more vibration is transferred to your body.
- Reduce the tool speed if possible.
- Keep your body and hands warm and dry. Direct air tool exhaust away from the hands to prevent chilling.
- Use vibration-dampening gloves. Be sure they fit properly and don’t require you to grip more tightly.
- Give your body tissues a chance to recover. Take frequent breaks and change your position often as well to help redistribute the force of the vibration.
- Don’t smoke. It makes you more susceptible to HAVS by constricting the blood vessels.

FINAL WORD

Vibration from tools and equipment can cause permanent damage to your body. Learn to recognize and address early symptoms of vibration exposure to prevent long-term problems later.