



Mines Safety Bulletin No. 167

Subject: Adequate assessment of fitness for work (reissued)

Date: 11 October 2019

Background

Fitness for work is the capacity for a worker to do their role and job activities safely and productively. Fitness for work depends on external and individual factors.

External factors include:

- nature of the work
- environment and other hazards
- location from medical services.

Individual factors include:

- physical health
- functional capacity (i.e. cardio-respiratory and musculoskeletal fitness)
- mental health and wellbeing
- alcohol and other drug use
- fatigue.

Mining operations should go beyond a general assessment of health and fitness and assess if individuals are able to safely complete their specific work-related activities. This means taking into consideration the person's functional capacity, potential impact of any medical conditions they may have and external factors.

Mining operations should ensure all workers have access to persons who are appropriately qualified to address the fitness for work risks that are likely to occur at any part of the mining operation, including remote field work activities. The distance of the workplace from specialised services such as ambulance, hospital and medical centres should be taken into account when determining the qualifications and experience required for on-site fitness for work assessors.

Providing effective response to those who experienced a change in their fitness or health may increase the likelihood of positive health outcomes for the worker.

Analysis of six years of reported natural deaths at mine sites identified that 60 per cent of these deaths were attributable to heart disease. The mining operations were informed in one third of cases where known pre-existing conditions were present.

As an example, two field technicians were conducting remote reconnaissance mapping on an exploration tenement in the Pilbara when one of the technicians collapsed and became unconscious. His colleague contacted emergency services and provided treatment but, within a short time, the unconscious person stopped breathing and could not be resuscitated. The field technicians had walked approximately 16 kilometres over rough terrain that day, and a similar distance the previous day, in temperatures up to 37°C.

The Department's investigation into the person's death identified that:

- the pre-employment and periodic fitness for work medical assessments were not related to the specific work activity being conducted
- the fitness for work assessment process did not adequately assess the capacity of the individual to undertake field work in the conditions likely to be encountered. In particular, the medical assessment did not adequately cover cardio-respiratory and musculoskeletal fitness, or consider the work environment.

Summary of hazard

Fitness for work assessments inadequately assess individuals and inadequately consider external factors impacting on an individual's capacity to work safely.

Contributory factors

A worker's fitness to undertake required work may be inadequate if:

- pre-employment and subsequent periodic assessments are conducted by persons who are not appropriately qualified and do not understand the nature of the hazards at the mining operation
- employees are determined fit for work against an incorrect job description
- employers do not provide medical practitioners with sufficient details of the role activities and environment for them to adequately assess fitness for work
- employers develop medical assessment criteria without input from medical practitioners, or without provision for medical practitioners to comment on additional areas of concern
- medical assessment forms may not contain sufficient background information on the worker to allow the medical practitioner to fully consider all relevant factors
- procedures for assessing fitness for work do not adequately address heart disease.

Actions required

Both employers and employees have responsibilities in regard to fitness for work. The *Mines Safety and Inspection Act 1994* imposes a general 'duty of care' provision to maintain a work environment in which, so far as is practicable, workers are not exposed to hazards.

- Pre-employment fitness for work assessments should ensure workers are able to perform their work safely.
- Fitness for work assessments should be conducted periodically, and when roles change, to ensure workers are able to continue performing their job safely.
- Employers should address fitness for work issues using a systematic risk management process that includes consulting with workers and safety and health representatives during the process.

- Employers should assess functional capacity of workers to undertake a task and taking pre-existing medical conditions into account when assigning tasks.
- Persons selected by employers to conduct fitness for work assessments should be appropriately qualified and experienced, and understand the hazards and risks at the workplace.
- Fitness for work should be clearly defined in the context of the type of work being undertaken and the work environment. For example, there will be different contexts for working in an underground mine, at a smelting operation and for isolated exploration work.
- Fitness for work assessments should be relevant to the type of work being undertaken. If the work is physically demanding, it is recommended workers undergo a physical fitness assessment testing cardio-respiratory and musculoskeletal fitness commensurate with the nature of the work.
- When workers at site report a health concern, the mining operation should have a process in place to address their concerns.
- If a worker must use prescribed personal protective equipment (PPE) to complete a work task, they should then have physical capacity to do so.
- Processes should be in place to alert supervisors to implement specific adaptations for known functional capacity arising from the fitness for work assessments.
- Employees have a responsibility to ensure their own safety and health at work. This includes declaring pre-existing conditions and their use of medication at their medical assessment.
- If workers notice a change in their fitness and health which may affect their capacity to undertake particular tasks safely, they should consult with an appropriately qualified person.

Further information

What is fitness for work?

www.dmp.wa.gov.au/Safety/What-is-fitness-for-work-7018.aspx

Guidance about medical fitness

www.dmp.wa.gov.au/Safety/Guidance-about-medical-fitness-7066.aspx

This Safety Bulletin replaces MSB No 161 (published 25 February 2019)

Note: This Mine Safety Bulletin does not cover the role of employers and workers in dealing with effects of alcohol and other substances on fitness for work.

This Mines Safety Bulletin was approved for release by the State Mining Engineer on 11 October 2019