

# Understanding musculoskeletal conditions in the workplace

White Paper

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**Musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions** can be defined as any injury or disease that affects the movement of the body, including disorders of the muscles, tendons, ligaments or nerves. Most commonly these can affect the main joints, upper or lower limbs and the back.

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An estimated 17.8 million people are living with an MSK condition in the UK with 51% of those affected being between the ages of 35-64, resulting in this being a major cause of work absenteeism. In 2016/17 8.9 million working days were lost due to MSK disorders and this number is only set to rise in the future. It is predicted that by 2030, 40% of the working population will be living with a long-term condition due to the increasing age of the working population and the rising prevalence of lifestyle factors such as obesity and a lack of exercise.

Employers have an ever increasing legal obligation to provide a safe work environment that does not cause damage to an employee's health, therefore, accurate risk assessments must be carried out to put policies in place that focus on the prevention of MSK conditions in the workplace.

**Here we look at the most common work related MSK conditions, potential causes and effective ways to support individuals:**

↗ *Back and neck pain*

MSK conditions are the second largest cause of disability worldwide with back pain being the most frequent complaint. While back pain is a common condition and can be extremely painful and debilitating, it is rarely due to a serious disease.

Back pain at work can be multi-factorial with increased prevalence in jobs that involve heavy lifting, repetitive tasks, sitting at a desk for a prolonged period of time and/or operating heavy equipment. Similarly, neck pain at work is often attributed to jobs that require prolonged time in front of a computer, coupled with poor posture that puts an increased strain on the neck muscles.

↗ *Tendinitis*

Tendons are flexible tissues that connect muscles to bones. Tendinitis can occur in any part of the body where tendons become inflamed due to overuse. It is painful and often worsened by movement. Commonly affected areas include the Achilles tendon, knees, elbows, wrists, feet, fingers, and thighs. The condition is usually caused when movements are repeated regularly and is particularly evident in jobs where people overexert themselves or lift heavy items in awkward positions, especially over the head.

### ▮ *Shoulder pain*

Shoulder pain affects 18-26% of the general population and is one of the most common regional pain syndromes. It is also among the most common MSK problems in workers, making it difficult for people to carry out tasks both at home and at work.

Chronic shoulder pain often stems from prolonged, repetitive, or awkward movements at work that put strain on the muscles and tendons of the upper body, including the shoulders. This type of pain is sometimes referred to as repetitive strain injury (RSI). Activities that can cause RSI include using a computer mouse, carrying or lifting heavy loads and using industrial machinery.

### ▮ *Hip and knee pain*

Pain in the hips, knees and legs usually happens because of overuse with reported symptoms of lower limb pain, aching and numbness. Manual jobs and those that require heavy lifting are most frequently associated with exacerbation of these symptoms.

Research suggests that there are several recognised disorders of the hips and knees which can be directly attributed to work such as hip and knee osteoarthritis, knee bursitis and meniscal tears.

## Offering support in the workplace

It is well recognised that as well as the workplace being a factor, the incidence of MSK conditions can also be attributed to individual lifestyle factors such as diet, obesity and an increasingly sedentary lifestyle. Whilst management of some MSK conditions may require specialist care and surgical intervention, many MSK conditions can be managed through a combination of exercise, psychological therapies and simple medications to help relieve the pain and inflammation experienced.

Increasingly, employers are beginning to take a much more proactive approach to MSK problems in the workplace by offering support to employees and encouraging healthy lifestyles to help reduce the development of MSK problems in later life. Support can be offered in a number of ways from facilitating exercise classes at lunchtime or after work, encouraging cycle or walk to work schemes and providing alternative healthy snacks.

Untreated and long term MSK conditions have been found to be directly linked to mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety and stress. Symptoms such as continued pain, loss of mobility and limitation of activities can cause individuals to lose confidence in their abilities and fear for the future. Over 30% of people will suffer from anxiety and 22% from depression as a result of their condition.

## Small changes can make a difference

Persistent and chronic MSK problems can affect an employee throughout their daily routine, not only at work. People often find ways to adapt when they are in their own environment, however, they may not always be given that opportunity at work.

The following small changes can be effective in enabling individuals to work despite their condition:

- ↗ **Encourage regular breaks**  
Try, where possible, to encourage employees to get up from a seated position and move around every hour even if it is just to make a drink.
- ↗ **Ensure correct seated position**  
For office workers, provide desk assessments for staff to ensure that the desk and chair provided are suitable for their needs and set up correctly to maintain good posture. This may involve supplying additional adaptive furniture such as foot rests or standing desks where necessary.
- ↗ **Change of task**  
Where possible, vary the tasks undertaken so that the same task is not carried out for a prolonged period of time without rest. This may involve rotating jobs with a colleague to help reduce repetitive strain injuries.
- ↗ **Adaptation of job role**  
Support for those people living with an MSK condition may involve more personalised adaptations to their role, including taking shorter regular breaks or reduced working hours as well as a change of role in some cases to avoid activities that are aggravating the condition.
- ↗ **Provide manual handling equipment**  
Supply specialist equipment to assist with the lifting of heavy loads in order to ease the strain of such tasks.
- ↗ **Allow time to attend healthcare appointments**  
Some individuals living or diagnosed with an MSK condition may require healthcare appointments to receive treatment (for example, physiotherapy). Flexibility to allow staff to attend these appointments allows the person to receive treatment whilst still remaining at work. Corporate private healthcare plans may help in providing a more flexible approach to treatment times, helping to keep employees in the workplace.

Being in work is good for not only the physical but also the mental health of an individual, and consequently, any of the above steps can help to offer much needed support to those that may be living with an MSK condition, regardless of the diagnosis.

Around 90% of MSK conditions are compatible with work and therefore supporting individuals in the workplace could not only reduce the amount of MSK related work absence but also encourage a positive working environment and increased productivity at work.

## Early intervention

It is well documented that early treatment intervention improves overall outcomes of associated MSK injuries. At Healix we are able to offer bespoke healthcare benefits tailored to the needs of the client and their employee demographic. We offer a dedicated MSK treatment pathway on our Healthcare Trust Plans which enables members to receive timely access to a dedicated team of experienced physiotherapists without the need for a GP referral.

Alternatively, we can facilitate healthcare cash plans providing cover for core MSK treatments ranging from physiotherapy to osteopathy to acupuncture, without the need for a GP referral. This has been shown to not only enable members to access treatment as quickly as possible but also to receive treatment at a time and place that is convenient for them around their core working hours.

### References:

*Health and Safety Executive; Musculoskeletal disorders 2018*

*World Health Organization; Musculoskeletal conditions 2018*

*Public health England; Musculoskeletal health in the workplace 2017*

*NHS England; Living well, ageing well and tackling premature mortality 2018*

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