

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)



RISKS TO
YOUR MUSCLES,
BONES AND
JOINTS

What should I know?

Damage to muscles, bones and joints is one of the most common work-related illnesses. Therefore, specific duties are proscribed in the Manual Handling Operations Regulations and the Display Screen Equipment (DSE) Regulations. The principal duties include:

- » avoiding the need for hazardous manual handling operations and tasks involving significant physical effort, repetitive movement, or poor posture.
- » assessing those hazardous manual handling operations that cannot be avoided, and reducing the risk of injury.

Damage to muscles, bones and joints by work can cause:

- » lower back pain
- » injury and pain to other parts of the body (e.g. arms, fingers, shoulders, neck, wrists, elbows, knees).

The signs, symptoms and effects of disease can include:

- » muscular pain, sore joints, tingling, burning and cramp
- » reduced mobility
- » becoming accident-prone, including slips, trips, falls
- » sleep disturbance
- » stress and pain affecting work, family and social life
- » frequent or recurrent sickness absence
- » loss of productivity
- » enforcement action, court cases, compensation claims.

The damage can be caused by, for example:

- » heavy manual lifting
- » pushing or pulling heavy loads
- » repetitive tasks, using the same muscles over and over again
- » poor posture during lifting, pushing, carrying and other hand–arm activities
- » staying in one position for too long (e.g. at a computer workstation or maintaining an awkward position, or prolonged driving)
- » lifting and carrying objects incorrectly
- » excessive vibration reaching the hands and the body.

Am I at risk?

You, your business and staff may be at risk, if there is:

- » heavy manual lifting on a daily basis
- » frequent repetitive movement of the same body part to do the job
- » a need for a large amount of manual force to carry, move, push, slide, stop, undo or extract workpieces
- » the use of hand-held powered tools on a daily basis
- » lifting above head height
- » repetitive handling of uneven or large size work pieces
- » a need to work in cramped conditions, affecting posture and load handling methods
- » a need to use or adopt an incorrect or uncomfortable posture to do work including computer-related tasks
- » whole-body vibration caused by work activities.

What should I do?

Establish or carry out the following:

- » Activities and use of tools, equipment and workstations that can contribute to injuries.
- » Who is exposed and what are the reasons for risk of injuries.
- » What preventive and control measures are needed.
- » Who needs training in manual handling activities, use of workstations, tools or equipment.
- » Talk to staff to identify any issues they have.
- » Arrange health checks for those at risk.

Ensure control measures you provide are used correctly and maintained. Consult employees or their representatives on matters affecting their health and safety.

What should I avoid?

- » Incorrectly designed or arranged work areas and benches.
- » High-vibration tools and equipment.
- » Blunt and unmaintained cutting tools.
- » Frequent and daily repetitive manual tasks without any mechanical aid.
- » Poor posture when using the body to do a task.

Where can I get help?

- » Scottish Centre for Healthy Working Lives, tel: 0800 019 2211 or www.healthyworkinglives.com
- » Health and Safety Executive, www.hse.gov.uk/msd

For further details see ‘Where to get extra help and support’ on pages 83–88.

Additional information

There are six ways to help prevent injuries to muscles, bones and joints.

1. Reduce manual force:

- » Reduce the weight of items or the distance moved.
- » Use levers (e.g. lift, wrench, hoist, forklift truck) or use a team of operators.
- » Use lightweight tools, supports, jigs.
- » Use low-vibration tools and maintain them.
- » Ensure adequate grip is applied to the load.

2. Reduce repetition:

- » Automate tasks or provide mechanical aids.
- » Break up work periods with several short breaks, or use work rotation.
- » Build in short pauses for very intensive and frequent work.
- » Use multiple steps in a process to reduce repetitive action.
- » Rotate staff to minimise exposure to repetitive tasks.

3. Use the right working position and/or station:

- » Design the task and equipment to suit workers (take into account differences in size, build, strength, health and right- or left-handed operations).
- » Provide platforms, adjustable chairs, tools and the right-sized gloves with adequate grip.
- » Ensure enough space is available to do the job.
- » Design the work to prevent sudden movement of the body.
- » Avoid awkward postures.

4. Improve the working environment:

- » Make sure the temperature is reasonable. Provide suitable clothing to keep warm in cold workplaces or tasks (e.g. cold-room work).
- » Avoid putting workstations near draughts.
- » Make sure the lighting is right for the job.

5. Tackle factors that influence work:

- » Consider pre-employment health assessment; you may have to provide suitable facilities under the Disability Discrimination Act.
- » Minimise production speed-related injuries.
- » Act immediately on any signs and symptoms of injury, encourage early reporting and provide health checks where necessary.

6. Provide training:

- » Provide training in the correct techniques for carrying out the work, and how to use tools and equipment correctly.

This is not a full list.