

Briefing

Employment adjustments for people with musculoskeletal conditions

Abridged content for sample purposes

Employment adjustments for people with musculoskeletal conditions

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Introduction

What are musculoskeletal conditions?

Musculoskeletal conditions affect the joints or tissues in the back (upper and lumbar region), upper limbs (neck, shoulders, arms, elbows, wrists, hands and fingers) or lower limbs (hip, knees and legs, ankles and feet) resulting from injuries or health conditions. Symptoms include muscle fatigue, pain, cramp, swelling, numbness, difficulty in movement and general discomfort. These can persist or become worse after working, not just when performing specific tasks.

Many musculoskeletal conditions are not directly work-related but the results of wider lifestyle or medical conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis. It is also possible for people to acquire musculoskeletal conditions as a result of the work they are doing. Regardless of cause, if they impact on an individual's work or ability to work, employers have a duty to make adjustments.

Many musculoskeletal cases will resolve without medical attention whilst others will require a GP's support; in some cases, referral to an expert will be necessary. There are a variety of conditions and in some cases pain is referred from the site of the initial problem to another part of the body. Different conditions require different types of treatment, adjustments and management approaches.

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The primary causes of these conditions are:

- Repetitive actions.
- Forceful exertion.
- Cumulative damage.
- Poor posture (including awkward movements).
- Vibration.
- Long periods of doing the same task.
- Cold working conditions.

Many other factors can combine to cause or exacerbate existing musculoskeletal conditions, including job design, equipment, the work environment, the intensity of work activities and stress.

People will be affected in different ways. The onset of an injury can be gradual, often with minor symptoms in the early stages but these conditions are generally progressive and cumulative.

Injuries can also develop rapidly, especially where workload, pacing of work or other demands are suddenly increased or intensified. Any symptom should be regarded as significant as long-term conditions can result if a symptom is ignored.

Musculoskeletal conditions are not always recognised or correctly diagnosed, with much disagreement and confusion around terminology. Generally, specific, localised conditions, for example 'tennis elbow', are easier to diagnose and better understood medically than the less localised or 'diffuse' conditions.

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Examples of medical conditions include (non-exhaustive list) [1],[2]:

- Back pain.
- Osteoporosis.
- Tenosynovitis.
- Axial spondyloarthritis, including ankylosing spondylitis.
- Lateral epicondylitis ('tennis elbow').
- Gout.
- Arthritis (rheumatoid, juvenile, osteoarthritis etc.).
- Myalgia.
- Frozen shoulder.
- Vibration-induced white finger.
- Sciatica.
- Degenerative disc disease.
- Ruptured or herniated disc.

There is no clear diagnosis for 'diffuse' musculoskeletal pain.

There can be an association between the tasks a person does and the symptoms they experience.

Musculoskeletal conditions can affect people's personal lives and their ability to travel to and from work, including traveling by public transport. Normal everyday tasks at home and at work, as well as sleep patterns, can also be affected.

[1] Arthritis Research UK, State of Musculoskeletal Health 2018 report

[2] DWP, Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefits: technical guidance

Employment and people with musculoskeletal conditions

Many people who have musculoskeletal conditions will be protected under the Equality Act 2010 but may not consider themselves to be disabled.

Nevertheless, employers have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments and not discriminate against employees who might be facing barriers at work because of a disability, even if it has not been diagnosed as a disability or accepted as such by the individual.

Employers should be aware that non-visible disabilities such as musculoskeletal conditions mean that barriers to work can be less obvious. This means it may be harder for employers to realise there is a need to take action. There are also organisations which offer specialist advice and disability awareness training to help employers ensure that their recruitment process accounts for barriers faced by those with musculoskeletal conditions – see page 21 for further details.

It is important that employers have an honest conversation with new and existing employees about the barriers that may be present in the workplace and what simple measures might help. The best practice approach is to make adjustments for anyone who needs them in order to work effectively and contribute fully to your organisation.

Employment adjustments for people with musculoskeletal conditions

Most employers will want to know what is 'reasonable'. Doing what seems fair for the individual and others who work for you given the size and resources of your organisation is a good place to start.

This guidance will help you deliver best practice. Remember:

- You might need to treat people differently in order to treat them fairly.
- Don't make assumptions about what people can and can't do.
- Ensure that everyone knows who is responsible for doing what and when it must be done.
- Involve the individual in generating solutions and respect their right to confidentiality.

For more detail on the law and making reasonable adjustments contact Business Disability Forum's Advice Service on telephone number **+44-(0)-20-7403-3020** or by email **advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk** or see our briefing on The Equality Act 2010.

Reducing the prevalence of musculoskeletal conditions

Changes in work, working conditions and technology mean that the occurrence of musculoskeletal conditions is increasing in certain areas. Examples of industries with highest rates of work-related musculoskeletal conditions are:

- Agriculture.
- Forestry and fishing.
- Construction.
- Public administration and defence.
- Transportation and storage.
- Human health and social work.

Musculoskeletal conditions can be a huge drain on your company's productivity: 24% of all working days lost due to work related ill-health are the result of work-related musculoskeletal conditions[3].

Symptoms of musculoskeletal conditions can be associated with specific movements including those with repetitive finger, hand or arm movements or movement involving twisting, squeezing, hammering, pounding, pushing, pulling, lifting or reaching. Static, fixed postures can also be a risk factor[4].

It is vital to take a positive and proactive approach to managing musculoskeletal conditions in the workplace, to minimise related absences and retain good members of staff. Address issues systematically and introduce changes and adjustments as part of a systematic review of work methods across the organisation.

[3]: Work related musculoskeletal disorders statistics (WRMSDs) in Great Britain, 2018, Health and Safety Executive [accessed December 2018]

[4] Musculoskeletal disorders - EU -OSHA

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Ask your staff what they find difficult, what problems they have and review the days that have been lost due to musculoskeletal conditions in your organisation. This will identify the extent of the problem and provide a starting point. This can be carried out through human resources or occupational health.

Job tasks, equipment, work environment and the duration and intensity of work activities will then need to be reassessed to minimise the incidence of musculoskeletal conditions being caused by work. This can be done in consultation with specialist assessors, such as ergonomists and occupational health practitioners but can also be completed by safety managers. The results of such assessments should be used to identify relevant adjustments.

Employers should explain to employees that they want to help people recover and encourage early reporting of musculoskeletal conditions symptoms. You may already have employees who are protected by the disability provisions of the Equality Act 2010 because of musculoskeletal conditions. You may also have employees experiencing some discomfort, which if not addressed could lead to future problems. Poor work practices and stress can lead to employees who have never had musculoskeletal conditions developing conditions.

By regularly talking to employees about their work, for example in appraisals, you may be able to identify difficulties that could be attributable to an employee having musculoskeletal conditions. This will then give you an opportunity to talk about adjustments that may enable the employee to work more effectively.

Content has been removed for sample purposes. Pages 11 to 22 are available in the full booklet.

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