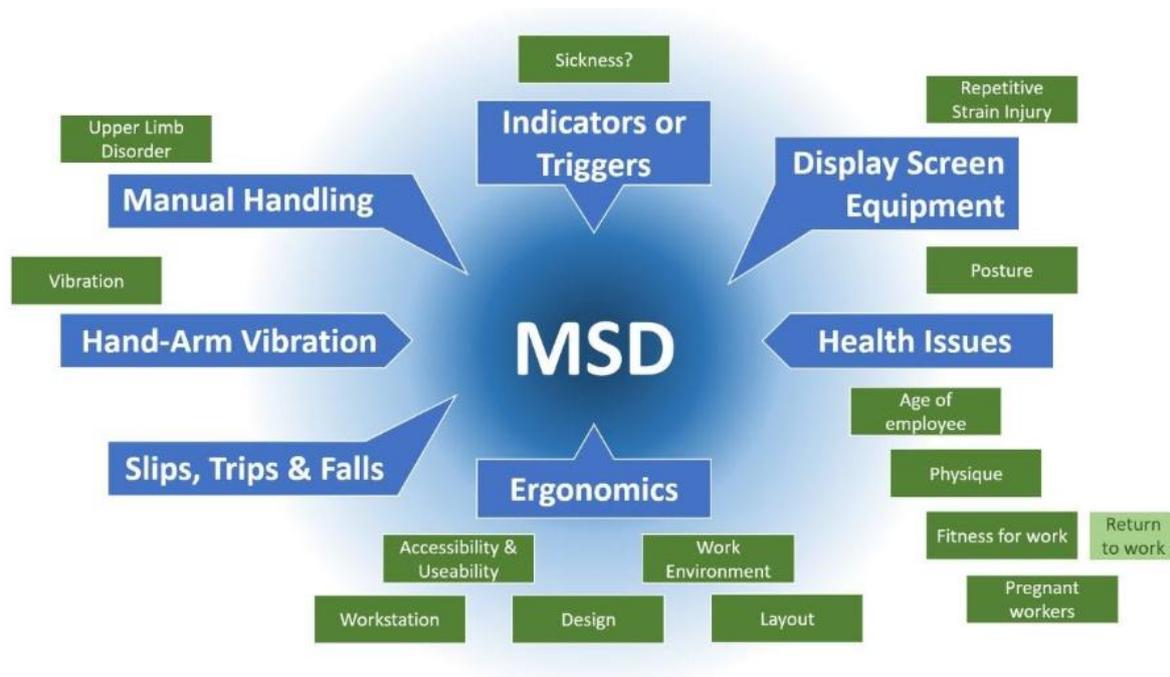


## CDOIF: Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSD's) – Health Issues: A guide to recognising and managing the impact of pre-existing health issues on MSD risks within the workplace.



### How pre-existing health issues can impact MSD's (and vice versa) within the workplace?

Musculoskeletal disorders can arise in any workers, but they can present an additional risk for workers with certain pre-existing conditions or physical attributes. These can range from acute and short-term strains and sprains of soft tissue such as muscles, ligaments and even nerves, through to more chronic and long-term ailments that involve the skeletal framework, e.g discs. Some people might be more at risk of developing MSDs due to factors which affect fitness to do certain types of work, such as physique, age-related physical changes in the body, certain types of injury or illness, pregnancy etc.

Across industry and commerce, there are over half a million cases of MSDs at any one time, resulting in an average of 16 working days lost per case. Of these just under 200,000 are new each year. Work-related MSDs represent about 40% of all work-related ill-health cases and over 30% of all associated working days lost.

### Why should an employer be concerned about health issues, and how can effective management have a positive impact?

Work activities that present a risk of new or aggravated health issues, range from lifting heavy or awkward loads and assembly-line work, through to perceived low risk activities such as using display screen equipment.

Back injuries are mostly associated with lifting and handling activities, upper limb disorders with repetitive tasks, including display screen use, and lower limb disorders with tasks involving prolonged kneeling, standing or undertaking short-term activities that require in an awkward stance.

All these causes can be effectively managed through clear understanding of the hazards involved, including existing health conditions, and it is only through such understanding that effective controls can be applied that will reduce the likelihood or exacerbation of ill health due to an unmanaged MSD risk.

### **How do I know if I may have a problem?**

- Sickness / increased absence with MSD as the reason:
  - Employee(s) suddenly show a greater frequency of absence, or a doctor has signed them off.
- An employee under- or not performing as expected
- Increase in near-miss incident or incidents involving physical injury but which don't result in absence from work.
- Increased use of an employer's employee assistance (EAP) or occupational health programme, if in place.
- Increase in potentially related cases of ill-health, whether they result in sickness absence:
  - Impact of MSDs on a person's physical health may make them susceptible to other illnesses.
  - MSDs may impact a person's mental health, especially if 'carrying' a chronic issue such as physical discomfort or pain.

### **What should I be doing?**

There is a general need for employers to examine, and risk assess what could cause ill-health due to a musculoskeletal disorder in the workplace. Such a risk assessment will help employers identify the significant ill-health risks in their workplace relating to MSD's.

An MSD focussed assessment should consider:

- Identifying hazards such as;
  - Unnatural working position or posture – is the employee being asked to work or operate in an awkward or unnatural position, do they need to twist, swivel or stoop often?
  - Is the employee required to work with heavy loads, be that lifting, pulling or pushing?
  - Is the task physically repetitive, even if low level, with regard to the effort required, i.e. typing?
  - Does the task require the employee to maintain a position or posture for prolonged periods?
- Identifying who might suffer ill-health and how, taking account of the following:
  - Consider the age and gender of the employee when assessing an existing or designing a new work activity or workstation.
  - Consider any impact on vulnerable persons such as those with disabilities, pregnant females, young workers (under 18's).
  - Understand and take into consideration any existing employee health conditions that may make them more susceptible to developing an MSD, and consider if the work might exacerbate an existing health condition.
  - Is there an over reliance on an individual to perform manual handling tasks?
- Providing new training or reviewing existing training around manual handling and display screen equipment to ensure that it adequately addresses the causes of MSD related ill-health and provides guidance on how to avoid them.

## How can I do it?

When assessing a work activity, especially if it involves any form of manual handling, the main areas to focus on are the task, load, working environment and individual capability, which will include any pre-existing health issues faced by the individual. These can be permanent or may only be temporary (eg pregnancy). The following actions will help you.

- Evaluate the risks and decide whether the existing precautions are adequate or whether more should be done.
- Establish an awareness program to highlight the risks, causes and consequences of ill-health related musculoskeletal disorders.
- Undertake a review of existing physical tasks and workstations – engage with employees to help you understand their needs and challenges, and to identify areas of improvement regarding MSD related ill-health risks.
- Where necessary, redesign work areas and work activities to reduce repetitive or high strain activities i.e. can a mechanical aid or assistance be used?
- Ensure that Display Screen Equipment assessments are up to date and actions arising have been addressed, this should include ‘hot desks’ and mobile devices such as tablets or smart phones.
- Ensure that you have trained DSE and workstation assessors to support your workforce and address any issues raised
- Encourage employees to take short but regular breaks where possible
- Consider whether a well-being program to address MSD ill-health would be beneficial, i.e. Yoga, stretching exercises etc
- Implement a return-to-work assessment process for those returning after an ill-health absence.

## Aids to help you evaluate the risks of MDSs arising in your workplace

As noted above, the main areas to focus on are the task, load, working environment and individual capability. The following aids can help employers assess various ill-health associated MSD risks:

- Manual Handling Assessment Charts (MAC) , which can be used to help identify high-risk tasks  
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/mac/index.htm>
- V-MAC for variable tasks  
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/mac/vmac/index.htm>
- RAPP (Risk Assessment of Pushing and Pulling) for assessing tasks that include pushing and pulling activities  
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/pushpull/index.htm>
- ART (Assessment of Repetitive Tasks tool (ART)), which can be used to help identify high-risk repetitive tasks.  
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/uld/art/index.htm>
- The Display Screen Equipment Regulations 1992 require employers to undertake an analysis of the workstation to assess and reduce risks. To help employers assess risks and to comply with minimum requirements there is a workstation checklist CK1  
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/ck1.htm>

## Further Information

- (1) HSE MSD website <http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/index.htm>
- (2) HSE Risk assessment <http://www.hse.gov.uk/risk/>
- (3) Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992  
<http://books.hse.gov.uk/hse/public/saleproduct.isf?catalogueCode=9780717666539>
- (4) HSE Manual Handling Assessment Charts MAC tool <http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/mac/index.htm>
- (5) HSE Variable Manual Handling Assessment V-MAC tool  
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/mac/vmac/index.htm>
- (6) HSE Risk Assessment for Pushing and Pulling RAPP tool  
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/pushpull/index.htm>
- (7) HSE Assessment of Repetitive Tasks ART tool <http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/uld/art/index.htm>
- (8) Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992  
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/l26.htm>
- (9) HSE Display Screen Equipment (DSE) Workstation checklist  
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/ck1.htm>

These might be helpful in understanding how to manage pre-existing conditions. They are paid for publications around £1.25 to £2.50

[The Arm Book](#)

[The Neck Book](#)

[The Back Book](#)

[The Hip & Knee Book](#)

### Disclaimer

*This briefing note is shared in order to promote learning and improve safety. You should seek appropriate guidance regarding the relevance, accuracy, and completeness of this information to your circumstances prior to implementation.*