

well@workLSC

Musculoskeletal health in the workplace

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Outline

- The importance of good musculoskeletal health
- Most common types of musculoskeletal disorders
- Co-morbidity
- Why is addressing musculoskeletal health important for organisations?
- Making the business case for addressing musculoskeletal health
- What can organisations do to promote good musculoskeletal health?

Importance of good musculoskeletal health

- Mobility, dexterity & co-ordination are essential for all types of work
- MSK conditions cause pain, stiffness, fatigue, restricted mobility
- Can affect work by limiting physical & cognitive function

Musculoskeletal disorders

- 1 in 8 of working age adults have MSDs
- More common with increasing age: 6.5m in 2008, 7m in 2030
- **Joint conditions:** osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis
- **Spinal disorders:** neck pain, back pain, sciatica
- **Regional pain disorders:** fibromyalgia, frozen shoulder
- **Injuries:** strains, sprains, fractures

- Acute vs chronic
- Fluctuating vs stable
- May be acquired from work or aggravated by work

Co-morbidity

- Mental health conditions are common in individuals with MSDs
 - Pain, fatigue & other symptoms can cause depression, anxiety
 - Work difficulties, sickness absenteeism & job loss also negatively affects mental health
 - Mental stress can cause MSK pain & strains
- 13% of those with back pain have depression vs 6% without
- People with poor mental health take longer to recover from MSDs & have poorer work outcomes
- **Important for organisations to address MSK and mental health together**

Why is addressing workplace health & wellbeing important?

- Happier people live longer than unhappy people, even after controlling for physical health conditions (Steptoe and Wardle, 2011).
- High wellbeing leads to better immunity, reduced risk of heart disease and stroke, speedier recovery from illness
- Low wellbeing associated with poor cardiovascular health and poor general health.

Why is addressing workplace health & wellbeing important?

Health affects behaviour:

- Higher wellbeing is associated with eating a healthier diet, less smoking, more exercise, less physical risk taking
 - Physical inactivity, obesity & smoking increase the risk of developing an MSD
- Happier people are more sociable & giving (Ankin 2012).

Why is addressing workplace health & wellbeing important?

Health affects organisational performance:

- Improving wellbeing improves cognitive function (creativity, flexibility, productivity)
- Organisations that invest in staff wellbeing are more productive

Why is addressing MSK health important for organisations?

- **Good quality** work is good for health and wellbeing
 - financial security, a sense of purpose, clear responsibilities, support
- Poor quality work
 - unsafe working conditions, highly stressful working conditions & inadequate training/support for staff
 - can cause development of MSDs or exacerbate existing ones
 - reduced productivity
 - sickness absence
 - job loss or early retirement
 - employment rate: 63% MSDs vs 81% no health conditions

The business case for addressing MSK health

- MSDs cost the UK £7 billion a year
- Work-related MSDs account for:
 - 35% of all work-related ill health (LFS 2017)
- Main cause of sickness absence: 33% of long-term absence

The business case for addressing MSK health

- Risk factors in all business sectors
- Higher rates in construction, manufacturing, transport, healthcare
 - More common in manual workers – mechanism for generation of health inequalities
- But sedentary behaviour also a risk factor

The business case for addressing MSK health

- Work-related MSDs **caused or made worse by:**
 - 44% manual handling
 - 22% awkward / tiring positions
 - 14% keyboard work / repetitive actions (HSE 2018)
- Cost to businesses:
 - legal costs from injury
 - sick pay
 - lost productivity
 - loss of key skills
 - retraining costs
- **....the business case for taking workplace health seriously**

What can organisations do to promote good MSK health?

- Avoid MSK-related sickness absence & job loss by implementing strategies to:
 - Promote MSK health & wellbeing

Resources to promote MSK health & wellbeing

**BUSINESS
IN THE
COMMUNITY**

- **Musculoskeletal Health in the Workplace: a Toolkit for Employers (2017)**
- **Mental Health Toolkit for Employers (2016)**
 - advice on how employers can promote MSK & mental health in the workplace
 - reduce the impact of MSK/mental health problems at work
 - reduce absence & job loss

Resources to promote MSK health & wellbeing



- What Works Centre for Wellbeing
<https://whatworkswellbeing.org>
 - **evidence** on effective interventions to promote wellbeing
 - **case studies** of organisations promoting wellbeing
 - resources for organisations to **measure wellbeing** & **evaluate** the impact of their policies on employees' wellbeing

Promoting MSK health & wellbeing

Good evidence that workplace wellbeing can be improved by:

- **Improving job quality**
 - training in problem-solving to improve areas of their own jobs;
 - changes to ways of working (job design, office layout)
 - improving communication
- **Providing wellbeing training**
 - relaxation, mindfulness, cognitive behavioural therapy
 - empowerment, stress management
 - setting personal life goals

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- Public Health England (2017). *Return on Investment of Interventions for the Prevention and Treatment of Musculoskeletal Conditions.*

Return on investment (healthcare savings, improved productivity & quality of life)

Return for every £1 spent:

yoga **£10**

vocational advice on overcoming obstacles to remaining in work **£11**

physiotherapy **£98**

What can organisations do to promote good MSK health?

- Avoid MSK-related sickness absence & job loss by implementing strategies to:
 - Promote MSK health & wellbeing
 - Identify ergonomic risk factors before they lead to pain, absence

Identify risk factors

Use sickness records, staff surveys & discussions with employees to improve understanding & regularly monitor:

- Work characteristics
 - physical & mental demands, work difficulties
- Workforce characteristics
 - age spectrum
 - gender
 - skills and expertise, staff shortages
 - their MSK problems, health & wellbeing

What can organisations do to promote good MSK health?

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 - Encourage discussions about MSK health & wellbeing to support disclosure about MSDs or concerns about risk factors

Encouraging disclosure about MSDs

- Stigma about certain health conditions can prevent disclosure
 - ‘non-specific back pain’, fibromyalgia, poor mental health
- Concealing a health condition at work results in psychological strain and stress (Pachankis, 2007)
- Yet disclosure to line managers is necessary if workplace adjustments are needed
- Early intervention is important: foster a culture that encourages open discussion about MSK health

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 - **Support work retention & return-to-work for employees with MSDs by implementing workplace adjustments (Equality Act)**

Workplace adjustments

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- **Workplace adjustments** support job retention for workers with physical and mental health conditions
 - **Temporal flexibility**
 - time off for therapy or doctors' appointments
 - phased return from sick leave
 - flexible working hours
 - **Alterations to the job**
 - lighter/alternative duties
 - **Alternations to work environment**
 - ergonomic equipment
 - homeworking

Workplace adjustments

HSE (2006) *Cost benefit studies that support tackling musculoskeletal disorders.*



- Hospital laundry: bending to lift wet laundry; bagging laundry
 - *Problem:* 29% staff absent with MSK injuries; 16 first aid incidents for MSK injuries each month
 - *Intervention:* job redesign & equipment to reduce manual handling
 - *Outcome:* 62% reduction sickness absence for MSDs; 12% increase in productivity; improved morale
 - *Cost:* £29,000 recovered in 4 months
 - *Saving:* preventing injuries saved £238,000 in 3 years

Workplace adjustments

HSE (2006) *Cost benefit studies that support tackling musculoskeletal disorders.*



- Newspaper office: intensive typing; tight deadlines
 - *Problem:* annually 3 new cases of sickness absence from upper limb disorders & 2-5 employees left the company
 - *Intervention:* ergonomic chairs, height-adjustable desks, regular breaks, improved lighting
 - *Outcome:* no new cases of MSDs or sickness absence for MSDs; reduction job loss; improved morale
 - *Cost:* £47,000 recovered in 27 months
 - *Saving:* preventing MSDs saved £83,000 in 4 years

Research with workers with rheumatoid arthritis: efficacy of adjustments

- Modified equipment, flexible working & lighter duties aided return to work/job retention & improved their productivity
- Sarah's specialist chair reduced her shoulder & arm pain so effectively that *"I found I've done more hours since I've had this...I was staying in work longer."*
- Suzanne was given a laptop to homework when in pain: *"I said 'if I could have the option of working from home you won't see a dip in my performance, I don't want my sick rates to go up and there's no reason why that should happen providing the right things are in place' and she was in full agreement so we got the laptop setup and I can work from home".*

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 - **Ensure workplace sickness absence policies don't increase absence**

Sickness absence policies

- Multiple absences can lead to disciplinary action
 - Can deter return to work from absence
- Jackie, a hospital pharmacist, feared returning to work too soon in case she “*failed*” to cope and needed further sick leave:
 - *“The bad news is the way things are at work if I go back and fail, make myself off again, they regard it as worse than if I stay off that bit longer.”*

Sickness absence policies

- Absence policies can be wrongly interpreted by line managers
 - Can force individuals to work when they should be on sick leave
- Martin, NHS medical instructor: *“On the one hand the Trust policy reflects a very sympathetic attitude towards people with disabilities; individual interpretation is quite another matter. So I make every effort to get in every day on time and do 110%...it creates quite a stressful situation for me because I don’t feel at my best when I have a flare-up but I still drive myself to do what I need to do because I’m fearful I won’t have a job in another 3 or 4 years’ time...but the threat’s not from the illness itself it’s more from attitude and that’s my biggest fear.”*

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 - **Train line managers**

Training line managers about MSDs & other health conditions

- Training on common MSDs & their work impact
 - Risk factors for MSDs
 - Links between stress & MSK pain
 - Importance of early intervention
 - Equality Act / implementation workplace adjustments
 - **Line manager training:**
 - Increases knowledge about health conditions
 - Promotes more positive attitudes towards illness
 - Increases their confidence in ability to manage illness at work
- (Dimoff et al 2016)

New study...

- New study starting 2019, funded by the Versus Arthritis/Medical Research Council Centre for Musculoskeletal Health and Work
 - What are the support needs of line managers in recruiting and managing employees with long-term health conditions?
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