

A Sound Ergonomics Program = Good Business Sense

OSHA estimates that 1.8 million workers each year report work-related MSDs such as carpal tunnel syndrome and low back pain. About 600,000 of these MSD injuries are serious enough to require workers to take time off work in order to recover. Ergonomic measures, if implemented effectively, will reduce these numbers.

The most common Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSD) risk factors are:

- Repetitive motions, such as typing and data entry, or repetitive placing, grasping, or moving objects
- Forceful exertions, such as heavy lifting, pushing, and pulling
- Awkward postures, such as reaching, bending, or squatting
- Pressure points or contact stress, such as when body parts like knees, hands, or wrists press or pound against objects
- Vibrations from using vibrating tools
- Using tools that are not ergonomically designed, such as screwdrivers with narrow handles or pliers that require a wide grip

Identifying MSDs

It is important to learn how to quickly identify the most common of MSDs as well as common symptoms, such as:

- Shooting pains or prolonged stiffness in the back and neck
- Pain, stiffness, or loss of mobility in the shoulders
- Shooting or stabbing pains or a feeling of numbness, in the arms and legs
- Swelling, stiffness, or soreness in elbow or knee joints
- Swelling, numbness, or loss of strength in hands and wrists
- Jerking movements, loss of strength, loss of mobility, or loss of feeling in fingers
- Pain at the base of the thumb
- Numbness or tingling, stiffness, or a burning sensation in feet and toes

Two critical steps at the first sign of MSD symptoms:

1. Report the problem immediately to a supervisor.
2. Seek prompt medical attention, since early treatment and intervention often can prevent the condition from getting worse or becoming permanent.

How to protect yourself against MSDs. For example:

- Change positions often and take stretch breaks in order to reduce exposure to excessive repetitive motions.
- Switch to other tasks that require the use of different muscles.
- Maintain a neutral posture as much as possible, and avoid working in an awkward posture whenever possible.
- Always use proper lifting techniques.
- Evaluate each job for possible MSD risk factors, inform the supervisor about these risks, and work together to make changes that will reduce or eliminate risks.
- Use material-handling aids, such as hand trucks, whenever possible to reduce the need to apply force to a task, such as heavy lifting.