

Supporting your team's musculoskeletal (MSK) health

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Introduction

In this guide, we'll explain what MSK means. We'll cover the importance of good MSK health in the workplace, and how you can support your team.



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MSK conditions
and symptoms

MSK at work
and mental health

Five support tips



What is MSK?

The term musculoskeletal (MSK), refers to the way your muscles, bones and joints work together for movement. Good MSK health can help your employees do their daily tasks easily and without pain. Taking care of your employees' MSK health now can help to prevent future aches and pains.

**1.7 billion
people**



**It's estimated that
around 1.7 billion
people are affected
by musculoskeletal
conditions worldwide.¹**

¹Musculoskeletal conditions. World Health Organization. who.int, published July 2022.



What are MSK conditions?

It's estimated that around 1.7 billion people are affected by musculoskeletal conditions worldwide.¹ In the UK, around 20 million people live with an MSK condition. These can be:

- **acute** – which means they develop suddenly and are usually temporary
- **persistent** – which means they continue for longer than would usually be expected.

MSK conditions include:

- shoulder pain
- knee pain
- arthritis
- broken bones (fractures)
- trauma, for example an injury from an accident
- sports injuries such as sprains and strains
- conditions affecting your muscles, for example sarcopenia
- regional pain disorders, like fibromyalgia or tennis elbow

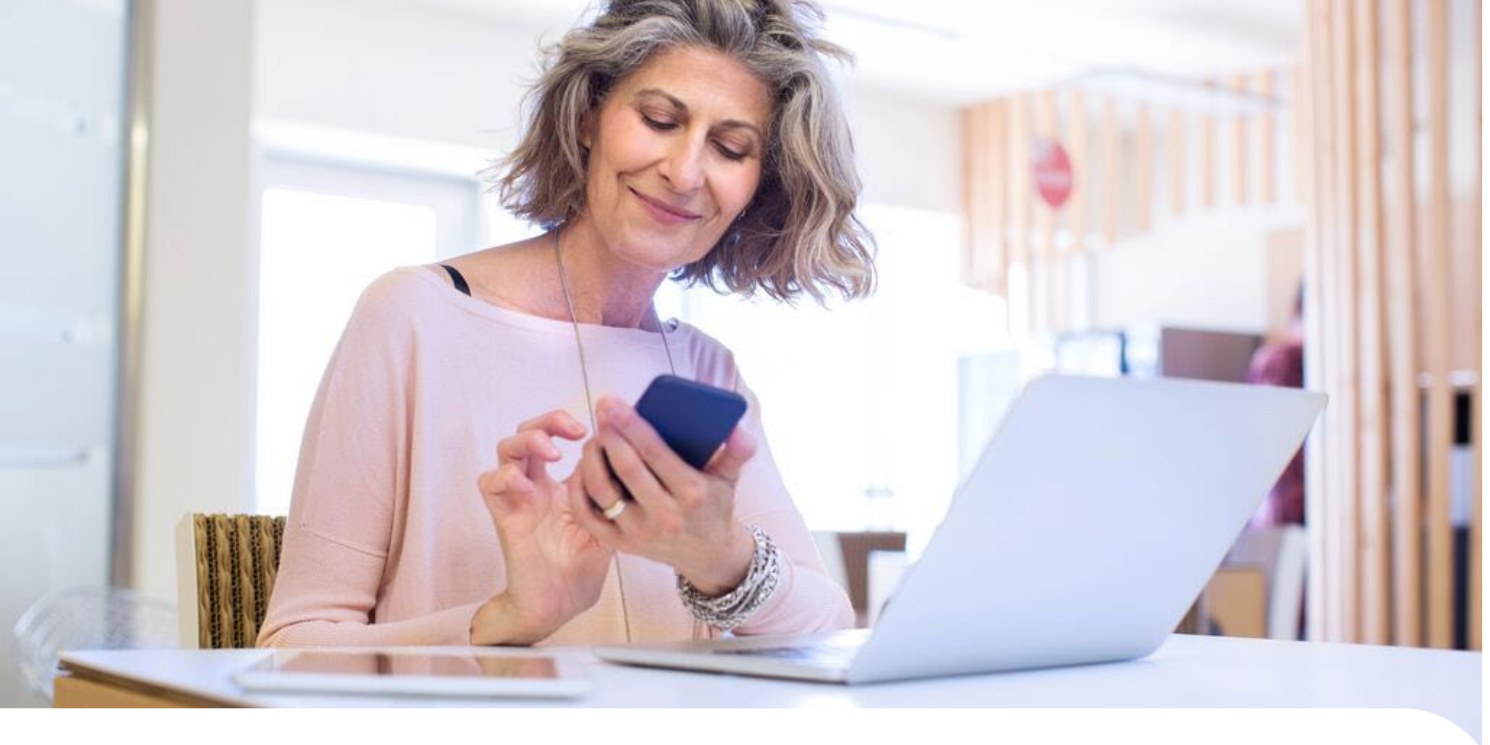
**10 to 11
million
people**



In the UK, between 10 to 11 million people are thought to have arthritis.⁴

⁴The state of musculoskeletal health 2023. Versus Arthritis. versusarthritis.org, accessed April 2024.

¹Musculoskeletal conditions. World Health Organization. Accessed 8 February 2021.



What are the symptoms of MSK conditions?

The symptoms of MSK conditions aren't always visible. So you might not know that one of your employees is having difficulties unless they tell you. Some of the symptoms of MSK conditions may include:

- aches, pains or stiffness in your muscles, bones or joints
- not being able to move as freely or easily as usual
- difficulty performing everyday tasks
- struggling to exercise
- poor sleep
- feeling a loss of independence
- difficulty taking part in social or work activities

**1 in 5
people**



**see their GP
about a
musculoskeletal
problem each year.⁴**

⁴The state of musculoskeletal health 2023. Versus Arthritis. versusarthritis.org, accessed April 2024.



What can cause MSK problems at work?

Some musculoskeletal problems can be caused by, or made worse by, factors at work. These could include:

- moving a heavy load
- repetitive movements
- not using display screen equipment (DSE) – such as laptops, tablets and smartphones – correctly
- sitting or standing for a long time without moving and taking breaks
- using power tools and operating heavy machinery
- a heavy workload and high job demands
- a poor work environment, such as the lighting or temperature
- working when overtired or injured
- bending, twisting or reaching
- driving long distances without regular breaks.

Incorrect use of equipment

Not using display screen equipment correctly, such as a laptop, can cause MSK problems at work.



What is the impact of MSK health in the workplace?

In the UK, musculoskeletal conditions are a top cause of working days lost each year due to ill health.⁵

Supporting the MSK health of your team can help both their physical and mental wellbeing. Adopting good MSK practises within your organisation can help to:

- improve productivity
- improve quality of life
- reduce sickness absence
- reduce presenteeism (working even when feeling unwell)
- improve retention and recruitment
- reduce the incidence of early retirement
- reduce costs associated with working days lost, sick pay and retraining
- prevent MSK conditions from developing in the future
- support people with existing MSK conditions to stay in work.

**23.3 million
working days
were lost
in 2021 because of
MSK conditions.⁵**

⁵Sickness absence in the UK labour market: 2022.
Office for National Statistics. Published April 2023.



Is there a link between MSK health and mental health?

Musculoskeletal health and mental health can be linked. Living with a painful condition can reduce mood and energy levels. It can also sometimes lead to feelings of anxiety or depression. On the other hand, feeling stressed or experiencing poor mental health can result in physical symptoms. This can also make any existing pain worse. So, it's important to consider mental wellbeing when supporting your team's MSK health.

Mental health and MSK conditions



are two common causes of sickness absence from work.⁵

⁵Sickness absence in the UK labour market: 2022. Office for National Statistics. Published April 2023.

Five ways to support your team's MSK health

1 Understand your team's needs

The MSK challenges of organisations and employees may vary across sectors, roles and responsibilities. The MSK support that your team needs will depend on things like your industry and the tasks involved. You might even manage a team of people who each work across different functions within your organisation. So, make sure you understand the needs of your individual team members. You can then take steps to prevent MSK problems from developing. **Ask yourself:**

Where are they working?

For example, employees could work from home. Or they may work at an office, warehouse, construction site, store or clinic.

What type of work is being carried out?

For example, employees that work on an assembly line might repeatedly use their hands. Healthcare workers might spend a lot of time on their feet.

How long is spent on each task?

For example, laptop users might spend a long time sitting and looking at screens. Delivery drivers are likely to be on the road for long periods of time.

What does the individual need?

For example, they might have an injury from playing sports, or a medical condition that impacts them at work.

What equipment do they require?

For example, some employees might need a desk chair, while others may need Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Up to
60% of adults
experience lower
back pain at
some point
in their life³.

³Musculoskeletal calculator:
Arthritis research UK.



2 Complete a risk assessment

As an employer, you have a legal responsibility and duty of care to look after the health and safety of your workforce, under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974. To do this, you need to carry out a general risk assessment. **This means:**

- looking for and identifying any hazards that could cause injury or illness
- deciding on the likelihood of any harm occurring because of these hazards (this is 'the risk')
- taking steps to remove or minimise any risks to your employees
- recording and reviewing the safety measures you have in place to check they're working



If you employ at least five people, you'll also need to make sure you keep a clear record of your risk assessments.

You might also need to carry out more specific risk assessments. This depends on the type of work your employees do.

Some examples of risk assessments include a:

- Manual handling assessment
- DSE workstation assessment
- Assessment of repetitive tasks
- Risk factors associated with pushing and pulling loads
- Exposure to vibration (under The Control of Vibration at Work Regulations 2005)

If you have a Property, Health and Safety, Human Resources or People team, they can help identify which risk assessments you need to complete. They may already have guidelines and policies in place that you can follow. Or you can visit the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) website. The HSE have many [toolkits](#) and [templates](#) to help you complete the legal risk assessments you need.

Two of the most common assessments you may need to carry out by law are:

DSE workstation assessment

DSE stands for Display Screen Equipment. This includes screens such as PCs, laptops, tablets and smartphones. If any of your team members use DSE for at least one hour every day you must complete a DSE risk assessment. This is required by the Health and Safety (DSE) regulations. You must also provide an eye test for anyone who requests one.

Using DSE for too long incorrectly can lead to aches and pains. This includes pain in your neck, shoulders, back, wrists and hands. It can also cause fatigue and eye strain. So, whether your employees work at the office or at home, your employees need to be kept as free from risk as possible.

Make sure everyone understands [how to set up their workstation](#). Also encourage regular screen breaks.

Manual handling

The term manual handling means to support or transport a load such as an object, person or animal. If any of your team members carry out manual handling as part of their role, the Manual Handling Operations Regulations require you to assess, avoid and minimise any risk of injury from manual handling at work. This means:

- avoiding any dangerous manual handling where possible
- carrying out a risk assessment when manual handling tasks are unavoidable
- putting safety measures in place to minimise any risk.

You can also raise awareness of MSK risks and good manual handling technique. One way you could do this is by organising training in your workplace.

Bupa Physiotherapist Caitlin McNicholas explains:

“If your teams are working from home, they might not have access to the equipment and advice they need to do this effectively. Without an appropriate setup, MSK issues can present in muscular aches, joint pain and stiffness.”





3 Provide support and make reasonable adjustments

Once you've established the specific MSK risks and the needs of your team, you'll need to give them support they need. This will help your team members to carry out their role safely. It will also help look after their MSK health both now and in the future. This includes employees with existing MSK conditions. There may be some changes you can make in the workplace that might benefit lots of your employees. Others may be more specific to the needs of one individual. For example:

- using lifting aids or trolleys to transport heavy loads
- providing equipment, such as a desk chair, headset, footstool, laptop riser, external monitor, PPE or knee pads for those who need them
- scheduling regular breaks
- rotating repetitive or long tasks between different team members
- allowing time off for health appointments
- reducing the time spent on particular tasks that might be difficult
- adjusting the work environment, such as the temperature or lighting
- delivering training events
- sharing helpful information resources
- signposting to occupational health and support services if they're available.

4 Promote healthy habits

There are some steps you and your employees can take to help look after your MSK health, both now and in the future. These include:

**maintaining
a healthy
weight**



**being
physically
active**



not smoking



**eating a
healthy,
balanced
diet**



So, it's important to encourage healthy lifestyle habits among your organisation.

Lead by example and help keep your teams moving by:

- arranging walking meetings where possible
- scheduling regular breaks
- taking time out to [stretch and move](#) getting out for a walk during the day
- setting a team steps challenge
- organising team workouts or yoga sessions
- sharing any employee benefits that may be available, such as free fruit, discounts on fitness trackers or gym memberships.

Regular exercise helps your employees to maintain a healthy weight. It can also reduce stress, improve sleep, improve mental wellbeing and build strong muscles and bones. Exercise can also help to improve symptoms for anyone who may have an existing MSK condition.

Bupa Physiotherapist Caitlin McNicholas advises:

“If someone is in pain, they might think they need to rest or feel worried that exercise would make their pain worse. Physical activity can improve your symptoms if you have an existing MSK problem. If you're feeling unsure or your pain isn't improving, speak to a Physiotherapist for advice.”



5 Encourage open conversations

Check in with your team members often. Ask how they're doing and whether or not they need any help with their MSK health. Lots of MSK conditions get better with the right treatment and support. So, encouraging your employees to open up and report any concerns will enable you to put support measures in place as early as possible. Ask if there are any work tasks that might be contributing to their condition. You can then address their concerns and minimise any risk. This will help your team members to stay in work, or recover and return to work when possible. You might also find it helpful to ask your employees if they've spotted any MSK risks at work, and to get their input and ideas on how to resolve them.



Resources

Further information

Risk assessment template and examples. Health and Safety Executive.
Health and Safety Executive. www.hse.gov.uk.

Toolkit for MSDs. Health and Safety Executive.
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