



Supporting your team's musculoskeletal (MSK) health: a manager's guide.

Practical advice, useful tips and
expert insight to help everyone.

For your team's wellbeing.

May 2021.

Introduction.

In this guide, we'll explain what MSK means, 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 does MSK mean?

The term musculoskeletal (MSK), refers to the way your muscles, bones and joints work together for movement. Having good MSK health can help your employees to carry out their daily tasks and activities easily and without pain. Looking after your employees' MSK health now can help to prevent aches and pains from developing in the future.

**1.7 billion
people**



**It's estimated that
around 1.7 billion
people are affected
by musculoskeletal
conditions worldwide¹.**

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

What is MSK?

MSK conditions

Symptoms
of MSK conditions





What are MSK conditions?

It's estimated that around 1.7 billion people are affected by musculoskeletal conditions worldwide¹. **These can be acute** – which means they develop suddenly and are usually temporary. **Or persistent** – which means they continue for longer than would usually be expected. Some of the most common MSK conditions include:

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

10 million people



In the UK, around 10 million people are thought to have arthritis⁴.

⁴What is arthritis. Versus Arthritis. Accessed 17 March 2021.

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
- poor mental health.

1 in 5
people see
their GP about a
musculoskeletal
problem each year^{2,4}.



²Musculoskeletal health: A public health approach. Versus Arthritis. Published June 2014.

⁴What is arthritis. Versus Arthritis. Accessed 17 March 2021.



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 one of the greatest causes of working days lost each year due to ill health – second to mental health conditions. It's also estimated that around 8.9 million working days are lost due to musculoskeletal conditions each year⁵.

But by supporting the MSK health of your team, you can help to look after both their physical and mental wellbeing. Adopting good MSK practises within your organisation can help to:

- increase 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.

**8.9 million
working days lost**

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conditions each year⁵.**

⁵Working days lost in Great Britain 2019/20.
Health and Safety Executive. Accessed 7 March 2021.



Is there a link between MSK health and mental health?

The connection between musculoskeletal health and mental health can be described as a two-way street. On the one hand, living with a painful condition can negatively impact your mood, energy levels and sometimes lead to feelings of anxiety or depression. On the other hand, feeling stressed or experiencing poor mental health can result in physical symptoms or 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 the two leading causes of sickness absence from work^{5,6}.

⁵Working days lost in Great Britain 2019/20. Health and Safety Executive. Accessed 7 March 2021.

⁶Musculoskeletal health in the workplace: a toolkit for employers. Business In The Community. Published March 2017.

Five ways to support your team's MSK health.

1 Understand your team's needs

The MSK challenges faced by organisations and their employees often differ across sectors, roles and responsibilities. And the exact MSK support that your team needs will likely depend on things like the industry you work in and the type of tasks being carried out. You might even manage a team of people who each work across different functions within your organisation. So, make sure you're aware of the needs of your individual team members so you can take steps to prevent MSK problems from developing.

Ask yourself:

- **Where are they working?**

Employees could work from home, an office, warehouse, construction site, store or clinic.

- **What type of work is being carried out?**

Employees that work on an assembly line might repeatedly use their hands, while healthcare workers might spend a lot of time on their feet.

- **How long is spent on each task?**

Laptop users might spend a long time sitting and looking at screens, while delivery drivers are likely to be on the road for long periods of time.

- **What does the individual need?**

One team member might have an injury from playing sports, while another might have a medical condition that impacts them at work.

- **What equipment do they require?**

Some employees might need a desk chair, while other may need Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Up to 1 in 6 adults experience lower back pain at some point in their life³.

³Back pain - low (without radiculopathy). NICE Clinical Knowledge Summaries. November 2020.



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 at your workplace 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.

Depending on the type of work your employees do, their place of work and the equipment they use, you might also need to carry out more specific risk assessments.

Some examples 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, ask for their support identifying 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 website, where you’ll find a series of useful [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, the Health and Safety (DSE) Regulations require you to complete a DSE risk assessment. You must also provide an eye test for anyone who requests one.

Using DSE for long periods of time incorrectly can lead to aches and pains in your neck, shoulders, back, wrists and hands. It can also cause fatigue and eye strain. So, whether your employees are in the office or working from home, it's important to ensure that everyone is treated the same way and kept as free from risk as possible. Make sure everyone understands [how to set up their workstation](#) correctly and the importance of having regular screen breaks.

Bupa Physiotherapist Will Kenton explains:

“If your teams are working from home during the pandemic, they might not have access to the equipment and advice they need to do this effectively. Many employees have been working from makeshift desks, kitchen tables and sofas over the last year. This isn't usually a problem for very short periods, but over time and without an appropriate setup, MSK issues can present in muscular aches, joint pain and stiffness.”



11 million Brits have pain

Research from Bupa UK estimates that 11 million Brits have pain in their back, neck or knees, hips or wrists because of working from home without the right equipment during the pandemic⁷.

⁷Hurting from home. Opinium Research. Commissioned by Bupa UK. 14 May 2020.



Manual handling

The term manual handling means to support or transport a load – this includes 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, and putting safety measures in place to minimise any risk. You can also raise awareness of MSK risks and good manual handling techniques by organising training in your workplace.



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 ensure they have the support they need. This will help your team members to carry out their role safely and look after their MSK health both now and in the future. It will also help any employees who may have existing MSK conditions to manage their symptoms, prevent their problem from getting worse and enable them to continue working. There may be some changes you can make in the workplace that might benefit lots of your employees, while 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 promote and 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 discounts on fitness trackers or gym memberships.

Not only can regular exercise help your employees to maintain a healthy weight, it can also reduce stress, improve sleep, improve mental wellbeing and build strong muscles and bones. It can also help to improve symptoms for anyone who may have an existing MSK condition.

Bupa Physiotherapist Will Kenton advises:

“If someone is in pain, they might think they need to rest or feel worried that exercise would make their pain worse. But 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 regularly to find out 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. Be sure to ask if there are any work tasks that might be contributing to their condition to help you 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

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