Musculoskeletal Health in the Workplace

An initiative of the Global Alliance for Musculoskeletal Health and the Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance UK (ARMA)

Professor Anthony D Woolf
Bone and Joint Research Group, Royal Cornwall Hospital &
University of Exeter Medical School

Part of a programme to enable people to have full and productive working lives through promoting musculoskeletal health and preventing work loss due to musculoskeletal problems
Musculoskeletal health in the workplace: a guide for employers

http://wellbeing.bitc.org.uk/all-resources/toolkits/musculoskeletal-health-toolkit-employers
Why is musculoskeletal (MSK) health important to you and for your business?
The impact of MSK in numbers

Good musculoskeletal (MSK) health is integral to a full and healthy working life.

The musculoskeletal system is the roots and trunk of the tree.

It gives us mobility, dexterity and agility and enables us to walk, run, stand, sit, lift and carry.

The fruit is good physical & mental health and wellbeing, activities of daily living, work and economic independence.
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MSK health is essential for all kinds of work affecting all industries and business sectors, from construction to banking.
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Action should be taken at all ages to invest good MSK health and reducing the risks of developing an MSK problem.
Why MSK health matters

- Some MSK problems directly related to work

In April, Lang Lang, 35, perhaps the most famous pianist in the world, canceled his touring appearances for the summer citing inflammation in his left arm. His doctors have prescribed rest and expect a full recovery in time.

Usain Bolt pulls up hurt in final race at World Championships
Why MSK health matters

- Some MSK problems directly related to work

- Many people have MSK problems that arose independently of work or as a result of previous work-related injuries but may affect their current ability to work.

Fibromyalgia: the chronic pain that thwarted Lady Gaga's tour

The singer's debilitating disorder was the reason behind the cancellation of her European tour - but the mysterious condition is not easy to explain.
- MSK conditions affect bones, joints, muscles, tendons and the tissues that connect them.
- associated with pain and impaired physical function.
- a range of causes, but sometimes the cause remains unknown.
- may be acute and short-lived (injuries); recurrent (back pain) and some long-term and progressive.
- More common as people get older when many will also face several other health problems but are expected to continue working.

**MSK conditions include:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition Type</th>
<th>Conditions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joint conditions</td>
<td>osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis, gout, ankylosing spondylitis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bone conditions</td>
<td>osteoporosis and associated fragility fractures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinal disorders</td>
<td>neck pain, low back pain, prolapsed disc and sciatica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional and widespread pain disorders</td>
<td>frozen shoulder, tennis elbow, fibromyalgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musculoskeletal injuries</td>
<td>strains and sprains often related to occupation or sports; high-energy limb and spinal fractures such as road injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genetic, congenital and developmental childhood disorders</td>
<td>club foot and scoliosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multisystem inflammatory diseases which commonly have musculoskeletal manifestations such as connective tissue diseases and vasculitis</td>
<td>systemic lupus erythematosus</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
MSK health and mental health are closely linked

- MSK and mental health problems are often interrelated.

- Chronic disabling pain and ongoing MSK problems can be associated with lack of sleep, depression and/or stress, leading to increased absence from work.

- Together they are the greatest causes of work loss.
The business case for supporting MSK health in the workplace is compelling.

- **Sickness absence** cost UK businesses an average of £522 per case.
- MSK problems, including back pain, joint injuries and repetitive strain injuries, remain the single biggest cause of absence from work and cost society an estimated £7 billion a year.
- Musculoskeletal problems affect 1 in 8 working age adults.
- One in 5 people are worried they won’t be fit enough to continue working in the next year.
- There are risks of poor MSK health in all types of business – ergonomic issues can cause MSK problems in the manufacturing industry, while sedentary behaviour can cause poor MSK health in offices.
- Poor MSK health impacts on most forms of work
**The business case**

There is a *strong business case* to support the workforce

- **MSK problems** represent a substantial cost to your business through:
  - Sick pay
  - Lost productivity
  - Loss of key skills
  - Retraining costs
  - Legal costs and injury benefit

+ **This represents a significant opportunity** for cost reduction, since:
  - MSK problems are manageable and can be prevented
  - Litigation can be avoided as preventing MSK problems often is a health and safety requirement.

- **Small and medium sized firms** (SMEs) can be disproportionately affected through the loss of key staff for any period of time because of MSK problems.
The legal case

Employers have a legal duty to provide safe workplaces

- Work that is unsafe or provides inadequate training and support for staff to do their job without injury can lead to MSK problems through both acute injury or repetitive strain.

- Work that is physically demanding and/or with high levels of stress impact on the person’s health, their ability to work at their most productive and are associated with high levels of work loss.
The moral case

The moral case is significant  Ensuring employees health, safety and wellbeing is the right thing to do.

Today, the best employers recognise the need to go beyond legislated minimum standards, and adhere to the highest standards of corporate social responsibility. It supports recruitment and retention of employees. It boosts productivity.
What can be done to prevent musculoskeletal (MSK) problems and reduce work loss?
Preventing work loss due to MSK problems requires an integrated approach
• addressing **the risks of injuries and of MSDs** in the workplace
• **promoting health and wellbeing** in the worker and the workplace,
• preventing work loss if a problem arises.

• **Helping employees to help themselves** to prevent MSK problems and to manage any existing MSK that impacts on work so they can participate in work even with an ongoing MSK problem.

Helping you help yourself
Preventing work loss due to MSK problems

- Individuals, employers, and health service providers must work together to reduce the incidence of MSK disorders and build a culture which promotes MSK health as part of a holistic, integrated approach to health and wellbeing.

Employers can help in a number of ways.
- assess and reduce the risk as far as is reasonably practical to make sure that the workplace is safe, and also designed to promote good musculoskeletal health, beyond their legal responsibilities.
- make adjustments to support employees who have MSK problems to help them remain at work.
- support an employee who is absent through ill-health to help them back to work.
- take a proactive approach by supporting employees to lead healthier lifestyles that will reduce the risk of MSK problems in later life (stop smoking, healthier diets, or enabling staff to have mini-breaks)
A stepwise approach
Know the challenges

Understanding MSK needs

To provide the right support to your employees you must know the MSK needs of your workplace and understand the challenges for your employees.

These include:

- **The characteristics of work**
  (physical and mental demands, shift patterns, variations in workload)

- **The characteristics of the workforce**
  (age spectrum, experience, gender, fitness, mixture of skills and expertise, staff shortages)

- **Their MSK problems**
  Use sickness records, staff surveys and appraisals, and hold regular, informal meetings with groups of employees to improve your understanding of the dynamics of the workplace.

Where MSKs are caused or made worse because of work, then address it through assessing the risk and reducing the risk as far as is reasonably practical.
MSK and mental health

- Employees with MSK problems are at higher risk of stress, anxiety and depression.
  - MSK problems cause pain, loss of mobility and dexterity, and limitation of activities.
  - This can lead to a loss of confidence, fears about the future, anxiety, stress and depression.
  - Stress, anxiety and depression also often manifest as MSK pain.
  - Mental health has an impact on a person’s ability to deal with an MSK problem.

- Employers and employees need to understand and recognise that dealing with an MSK problem may require support for their mental health.

Source: www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/downloads.htm
Open communication is essential

An open, positive culture should be central to your approach to MSK problems.

A workplace with a positive culture enables an employee to look after their own MSK health, speak up and receive early treatment and support, and continue to work even if they have some limitations.

An open culture should be led from the top, with a clear signal from senior management that the organisation cares about the wellbeing of all employees, at all levels.

Beginning the conversation

Knowing where to start can be a challenge

Training in communications is needed to form a workforce that openly speaks about risk, their own health and listens to other workers.
Open conversations
People suffer in silence for too long. Then, when they do go off work, it is likely to be for a long time

“Do you have any health problems that affect you, such as pain, stiffness or stress?”

“How are you?”

“Can you do all the physical roles you need to without difficulty?”

“If you have difficulties, how can we help you work around them?”

Have open conversations about any background factors that may be affecting the impact of the MSK problem on the employee, whether in or outside work
Prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation

The ultimate goal is to provide a workplace that
• takes preventative action,
• encourages early intervention for any MSK problem and
• accommodates effective rehabilitation and return to work plans.

Prevention
• Optimise physical health
• Avoid risks and hazards
• Open dialogue with line managers, occupational health and H&S
• Early identification of physical capability problems of employees

Early intervention
• Early intervention if work is compromised by or aggravates MSK problems
• Reasonable adjustments to work

Rehabilitation & return to work
• Rehabilitation programmes
• Return to work programmes
• Self management
Prevention

The primary responsibility on prevention lies with the employer, which is why risk management and assessment processes are critical when managing MSK health in the workplace.

Employees must also take responsibility in implementing good practice and behaviours.

The most important aspect of prevention is
• reducing workplace risks and hazards,
• supporting staff to reduce their lifestyle risk factors to reduce risk of MSK harm at home as well as work.

This includes:

- Preventing accidents and injuries
- Reducing workplace risk through health and safety
- Increasing physical activity
- Improving diets, enabling people to achieve an ideal body weight
- Encouraging employees to stop smoking and reduce alcohol consumption
- Reducing stress
- Worker consultation. Employers are obliged to consult with staff (this should involve union safety representatives where feasible)
Avoid hazards and risks

Consider what the main risks to MSK health are in your working environment, based on roles, tasks and nature of your workforce (processes and people):

- **Employee tasks** (including visual display users, manual lifting, prolonged sitting or standing, repetitive movement of certain body parts).
- **Length of working day** and break down of employee tasks within a working day.
- **Work setting** (e.g. office, warehouse, transport cabin – car, train, aircraft etc., mechanical factory, handwork factory).

**Early identification of physical capability problems of employees**

Conversations between employees and their managers should identify when there is a physical capability issue.

A survey by Arthritis Research UK in 2016 found that people ‘put up and shut up’ and suffer in silence when it comes to workplace health.
Employers have a legal obligation to protect the health and safety of their employees and other people who might be affected by what they do. Some health and safety regulations are particularly relevant to dealing with MSK issues in the workplace:

- **Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999**
  - Regulation 3 requires that all employers assess the risks to the health and safety of their employees while they are at work.

- **Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992 as amended (DSE Regulations)**
  - Some users of visual display units may get aches and pains, including back pain. The regulations set out what employers need to do if their employees are habitual users of DSE.

- **Reasonable Adjustments part of the Equality Act 2010**
  - Employers need to provide adjusted working conditions to aid employees with a disability or medically reported health problem — as deemed feasible and possible by a healthcare professional.

- **Equality Act 2010**
  - Employers are obliged to provide equal opportunities and protect from discrimination.

- **Control of Vibration at Work Regulations 2005**
  - Regular long-term exposure to Whole Body Vibration (WBV) is associated with back pain. The regulations require an employer to take actions to protect persons against risk to their health and safety arising from exposure to vibration at work. More information can be found at the HSE’s vibration website.

- **Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992 (as amended) (MHOR)**
  - Require an employer to carry out a risk assessment on the manual handling tasks that pose a risk of injury.

**Potential grants**

You may be entitled to grants from your local authority to aid the implementation of any reasonable adjustments.

Additionally, the Department for Work and Pensions has a Fit for Work initiative, which can help shape your strategy to keep an employee with an MSK issue in work.
Early intervention

The sooner a MSK problem is managed, the less likely there will be long-term work loss.

Often simple measures can be taken to enable the employee to stay in work.

This means enabling and encouraging employees to talk about a MSK problem as soon as it arises.

- **Reasonable adjustments** can be made to their work and professional support encouraged and enabled.

- **Management of MSK problems** requires a joined-up approach that involves the employee, their healthcare team, and their line manager helping them to return or stay at work.

- **Psychological barriers** need to be recognised and worked around - frustration, anxiety and fear of the future.

- The **Fit Note** is an important document to assist with overcoming these barriers and to ensure that you take the correct action.

Physical barriers are the practical challenges associated with undertaking work-related activities when someone has a painful and limiting condition.
**Adjustments in the workplace**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most employees with an MSK problem are able to continue in work, providing there is some allowance for their problem.</th>
<th>Employees do not want to keep saying they cannot do something. Co-workers and line managers need to understand and pre-empt difficulties the worker may have.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuing in work within their abilities will not cause more damage or a worse health outcome in the long-term.</td>
<td>Employees need the opportunity to find ways around their problems in the workplace as they do outside work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As an employer, you are legally obliged to provide adjustments that are deemed necessary and feasible*.</td>
<td>Small changes can be effective in enabling them to work despite their condition.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Rehabilitation and return to work**

Some MSK problems will be long-term or recurrent and then rehabilitation and a return to work programme is needed.

Support can be provided directly by you but there is also much support available from the public and voluntary sectors.

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*Reasonable Adjustments part of the Equality Act 2010: employers need to provide adjusted working conditions to aid employees with a disability or medically reported health problem – as deemed feasible and possible by a healthcare professional*
Helping employees to manage their own health problems, or self-management, is an important approach to be used in conjunction with any support provided by the employer or healthcare professionals.

Self-management behaviours develop over time and are a product of the experience of living with the condition.

You need to:

- Know what support your employees need
- Signpost employees to knowledge and support that will enable them to manage their conditions
- Provide reasonable adjustment and adaptation
- Provide individual support related to their specific problem which helps employees to work to their potential
Look for quick wins and simple things to get the ball rolling:

- A workplace risk assessment and a wellbeing survey can help identify MSK problems, providing some immediate feedback so you can start improving straight away.

- Work with staff to develop your approach. Harness your workforce to deliver it together.

- Encourage and support an open positive culture

- Encourage your senior leadership to become involved.

- Encourage and support your health and safety lead. Engage and empower your employees to become wellbeing champions for MSK health

- Work with others. Consider win-win partnerships with external resources and organisations. Link your wellbeing activities to national awareness days.

- Encourage minibreaks during the working day

- Signpost employees to sources of information and support.
You can help employees by signposting the best support available for MSK problems provided by the NHS, Public Health England, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy and the voluntary sector.

The NHS has video exercise guides for different parts of the body, which can raise awareness of preventative behaviours, both in and out of work. Almost everyone has low back pain at some time so it is worth getting everyone engaged.
Knowledge and training

Training should aim to enable staff to do their jobs in a safe and sustainable way, minimising risks to their health.

- All staff (managers and workers) need to be aware of the risks associated with any tasks. It is not just about equipment or policies but also about giving people the ability to look after their own health and provide an environment that enables this.

- Follow-up supervision is crucial to ensure that techniques and practices learnt in training are continuously applied.

- There must be a system in place to manage the training and education requirements of staff and to ensure that their training is kept up to date.

Training must meet the needs of the organisation and of the workforce. Good feedback is needed. It also needs to improve practice, not just increase knowledge. An appraisal to show the impact of training is also needed. The appraisal needs to be formative with feedback on how to make real improvements, rather than just highlighting what people do not know.
Knowledge and training

Knowledge and Training needs to go further to support a healthy workplace.

Managers:
• Are aware of and understand health and wellbeing messages, including the importance of MSK health
• Understand the links between MSK health and mental health
• Know how to communicate with and how to support employees

Employees:
• Understand MSK health
• Understand the risk factors, including equipment and processes
• Know how to help themselves

Training in communications should aim to form a workforce that openly speaks about risk, their own health and listens to other workers.
Line managers have a crucial role to play. Their knowledge and commitment will be the foundation of your organisation’s initiatives to promote MSK health.

By understanding the importance of MSK health line managers can:

- **Ensure** there is an optimum match between an employee’s capabilities and job demands.
- **Equip** employees with the necessary skills to cope with the demands of their job, through training and other support.
- **Encourage** employees to place a high value on health and safety at work.

Help employees to understand the potential benefits of training to support MSK health as part of their overall health and wellbeing.

Training can focus on:

- Promoting their own health by understanding and following a healthy lifestyle, including exercise and diet.
- Understanding of their legal responsibilities in relation to health and safety and MSK work related risk.
- Avoiding risks to MSK health.
- Positive attitude about work, and staying in work or returning to work despite an MSK problem.
- Identifying and arranging their own adjustments or do so working with fellow employees. There may be a role for training workers and co-workers to facilitate the adjustments process.
Going further is all about becoming an ambassador for MSK health as a business. Sharing your stories can help other businesses provide support for their employees, and by being part of a community you can learn what others are doing, to support the continued development of your own approach to MSK health.

Use your supply chain
Your supply chain can provide a route to becoming a leader in MSK health and employment.

Use business organisations
Your trade organisation and local chamber of commerce will be eager to learn from your experience and to share with other members.

Tell your story
Use press releases and blogs to tell a wider audience about your organisation’s commitment to MSK health, and to celebrate your milestones. Promote your initiatives through thought leadership in trade press, specialist journals and relevant social media.
Musculoskeletal health in the workplace: a guide for employers

Click here to read the toolkit

http://wellbeing.bitc.org.uk/all-resources/toolkits/musculoskeletal-health-toolkit-employers
The toolkit explains:

- Why MSK health is important to you and for your business
- What can be done to prevent MSK problems and reduce work loss
- How you can achieve this, whether you are a small, medium or large employer

- This toolkit is a simple step-by-step resource for dealing with back, neck, muscle and joint pain at work.
- It will help you pick out the best free resources that are right for you and your team, whatever the size of your organisation.
- It does not involve significant expense and can save you money in the long run.
Checklist of actions

☑ Do you recognise that MSK health is important to your workplace and employees?
☑ Have you communicated to them that you recognise the importance of MSK health?
☑ Have you asked them about MSK problems and solutions?
☑ Have you measured the extent and nature of any MSK problems?
☑ Are you ready to build your approach?
☑ Do you know the risks to MSK health in your workplace and the problems employees encounter?
☑ Have you fully considered your responsibilities under health and safety legislation to protect employees?
☑ Are the roles and responsibilities of individuals or groups in your business to enable an employee to stay in work clearly defined?
☑ Do you encourage and support open conversations to enable early reporting and solution-finding that enable employees to stay in work?
☑ Do you encourage and support self-management?
☑ Do you know how to access occupational health services?
☑ Do you know which external resources you can use to support employees to stay in work (i.e. government grants to aid reasonable adjustments)?
☑ Is support for MSK problems signposted to all your employees?
☑ Do you review individual needs and make reasonable adjustments and adaptations to their work?
☑ Do you support their physical and mental health?
☑ Is training on MSK health for managers incorporated into your health and wellbeing strategy?
☑ Is training on MSK health for employees incorporated into your health and wellbeing strategy?
☑ Does training include the link between MSK health and mental health?
☑ Does training include communication skills?
☑ Is training implemented?
☑ Is there feedback to ensure training meets needs?
☑ Is training evidenced-based?
☑ Do employees know where to find information?
Business in the Community’s Workwell Model supports employers to take a whole systems, whole person approach to wellbeing. It provides an ideal template to help embed a positive approach to good MSK health in the workplace.

**Better physical and psychological health:** Creating a work environment that promotes healthy behaviours, both physical and mental. There is a clear link between good MSK health and mental health and wellbeing.

**Better work:** Creating a happy, engaging environment of good work, which is underpinned by good job design, employee voice and a management style and culture that promotes mutual trust and respect.

**Better relationships:** Promoting better communications and social connections need for good mental health wellbeing. Engaging staff in developing solutions so the approach to MSK is co-produced together.

**Better specialist support:** Ensuring teams manage MSK health issues at work in a proactive way, and facilitate a more efficient return to work for those off work.

**Working well:** Positioning employee wellbeing as a boardroom issue, including the importance of MSK health; creating a culture of wellbeing where employees feel trusted and respected, underpinned by strong governance and reporting arrangements.
Key Steps

✔ Recognising the importance of MSK problems within the workplace
✔ Knowing the risks and the problems in the workplace
✔ Open conversations
✔ Promoting MSK health through physical activity
✔ Reducing risks in the workplace
✔ Helping people manage their own health
✔ Supporting early action
✔ Supporting employees
✔ Training managers and employees to understand MSK health
Case studies to show how it can be done
This toolkit has been developed for employers. The content is based on research evidence and on the experiences of what employers and employees, including those with musculoskeletal problems, have found to reduce the impact of such problems on work.

It has been developed for PHE and ARMA by Business in the Community, Forster Communications and the Bone and Joint Research Group, Royal Cornwall Hospital. We would like to thank all the experts, employers, employees and organisations that have contributed their knowledge, experience and time.

Resources for employers

Business in the Community and Public Health England have developed a range of toolkits to support employers with employee health and wellbeing:

http://wellbeing.bitc.org.uk/all-resources

Musculoskeletal health in the workplace: a toolkit for employers

http://wellbeing.bitc.org.uk/all-resources/toolkits/musculoskeletal-health-toolkit-employers
Musculoskeletal Health in the Workplace

A programme to enable people to have full and productive working lives through promoting musculoskeletal health and preventing work loss due to musculoskeletal problems

“Keep people moving”

Contact Anthony.Woolf@nhs.net if you wish to know more about how you can help reduce the impact of MSK problems in your workplace