
Working with Pain: Dealing with Musculoskeletal Disorders

How do you know if you have a musculoskeletal disorder (MSD)?

Our bodies normally recover from the wear and tear of work after a period of rest. But if the stresses continue day after day, the damage can add up and lead to overuse injuries.

Symptoms of MSDs are most common in the hands, arms, shoulders, neck and back. They include:

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|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| -Pain (aching or sharp) | -Numbness |
| -Stiffness | -Tingling (“asleep”) |
| -Swelling | -Unexplained weakness |
| -Loss of coordination | |

If your work exposes you to repetitive, awkward or heavy work, these symptoms are signs that you may have an MSD. See a doctor if your symptoms:

- last for more than a week
- bother you so much you restrict activities or take sick time to recover.

See chart on the previous page for the names and specific symptoms of many MSDs.

What should you do if you believe you have a MSD?

- Seek early treatment. The longer you have symptoms, the harder they can be to treat successfully.
- Find a doctor who understands work-related health problems. Don't be afraid to educate your doctor about the causes of MSDs.
- If your problem is work-related, file a workers' compensation claim for lost time and for medical costs, even if you haven't missed work. If your doctor agrees that your condition is work-related, make sure he or she will say so in writing.
- Don't return to the same working conditions that caused your problem. Work with others at your workplace to ensure that the equipment or activities that contributed to your injury are changed.
- Above all, don't let your condition get you down. Finding the right doctor, getting effective treatment, filing a workers' compensation claim and improving your work environment take persistence and energy. Don't hesitate to ask for help, and don't give up until the problem is solved.

Adapted from: Working Without Pain Train-the-Trainer Program, Trainer's Guide to the Ergonomics Hazards Awareness Curriculum, by Robin Mary Gillespie and Amy Manowitz, COEH Hunter College School of Health Sciences, New York, NY Spring 1998