



MITIGATING THE RISKS OF **MSDs** IN **HYBRID WORKING** A MANAGER'S GUIDE



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INTERNATIONAL
WORKPLACE

FOREWORD

Long gone are the days where 'one employee equalled one designated desk'. With the way we work constantly evolving and being redefined, the requirement for designated seating arrangements is fast becoming extinct in the modern workplace.

With today's office now home to a mixture of permanent, mobile and freelance staff, more and more companies are seeing desks lie empty and unused. Hotdesking allows employees to choose the correct working environment for them, depending on what they are doing on a particular day. Hotdesking means employees can move freely around the workplace, retreating to a quiet place when they need to get work done, or a collaborative space in order to bounce ideas around.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made homeworking commonplace, with a report by the Office for National Statistics finding that 46.6% of British employees worked from home at the height of lockdown.¹ Many office workers enjoyed operating remotely at first, with the benefit of not having to commute. However, the negative physical implications have now started to show.

Working from home has caused a significant increase in musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). While some employees may be lucky enough to have a home office set-up, others will be working from the kitchen table, a cramped corner, or even their sofa or bed. This is bound to exacerbate issues. Even for those in the office, hotdesking and shared workspaces mean that desks and seats are no longer set to each individual's requirements. MSDs are not just an issue for older employees but affect all generations.²

One of the key challenges with mobile working is that we can find ourselves working in physically 'un-ergonomic' ways – e.g. working for long periods using a laptop on our knees. Working in awkward or unsupported postures increases the risk of developing musculoskeletal pain. MSD issues are a ticking time-bomb. We need to address them now before we have a whole generation of employees suffering with MSDs due to COVID-19 restrictions. This requires a rethink in how we approach this type of care requirement.

This guide will help you understand the issues and give some tips to help mitigate the dangers.



KATE GARDNER

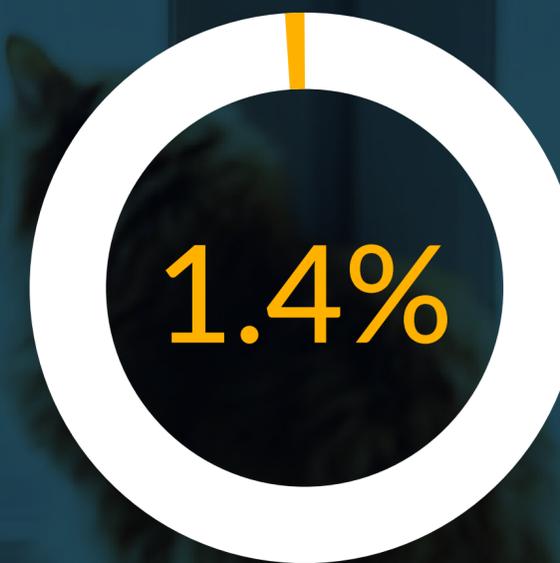
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WHAT ARE MUSCULOSKELETAL DISORDERS?

The European Agency for Safety at Health at Work (EU-OSHA) defines work-related MSDs as “impairments of bodily structures, such as muscles, joints and tendons, that are caused or aggravated primarily by work or the effects of the immediate work environment”.³ They can be highly detrimental to an individual’s quality of life and ability to work and are one of the most common causes of disability, sick leave and early retirement. The most common work-related MSDs are backache and pains in the upper limbs. Physical, organisational, psychosocial and individual factors can contribute to their development. Desk jobs are common causes of these conditions, which can lead to recurrent pain, swelling, aches, and stiff joints.

When severe, the discomfort experienced can interfere with everyday activities such as typing. Maintaining a healthy posture while working is vital for preventing these symptoms.

In 2019, just 1.4% of the working population experienced work-related musculoskeletal disorders – at a time when just 5.1% of the total UK workforce worked mainly in their own home. During the lockdown, 46.6% of British employees did some work at home, leading to an astronomical 37.7% increase in musculoskeletal cases connected to work.



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Even before the rise in remote working, keyboard work was cited as the third biggest work-related cause of musculoskeletal conditions, overtaking heavy machine operation.⁴ This risk has been heightened further by workers operating from unsuitable at-home workstations.

In September 2020, a survey⁵ revealed that 81% of employees working remotely during the first lockdown had experienced back, neck, or shoulder pain. Nearly a quarter of respondents were affected by these symptoms often or all the time. Another 46% were taking more painkillers than they would like, to reduce aches and pains.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

If workers are habitual users of display screen equipment, employers can undertake the following to avoid the risk of MSDs:

- > Carry out a DSE workstation assessment.
- > Make sure workers take breaks from DSE work or do something different.
- > Provide an eye test if a worker asks for one.
- > Provide training and information.

THE BUSINESS CASE

According to EU-OSHA, MSDs affect individuals' ability to work and are therefore a major cost burden for businesses and economies:



ABSENTEEISM

Absence from work due to MSDs accounts for a high proportion of lost working days. Workers with MSDs are also more likely to be absent for a longer period of time.



PRESENTEEISM

Experiencing pain at work as a result of an MSD is likely to affect performance and productivity.



EARLY OR FORCED RETIREMENT

Workers suffering from an MSD may need to give up work and are more likely to believe they will not be able to do the same job at the age of 60.

Given the high prevalence of work-related MSDs, it makes good business sense to invest in preventing their onset or occurrence. MSDs are manageable and can be preventable, so costs related to MSDs can be reduced. Taking simple measures such as providing professional support and adjusting the work environment as soon as symptoms appear significantly lowers the chance of long-term absence from work. Such prevention and early intervention measures can reduce absenteeism, increase productivity and lead to real savings for businesses.

HOW CAN IT BE MANAGED?

Taking an integrated approach and promoting a prevention culture involving both employers and workers are key to tackling the issue. EU-OSHA highlights the following pointers:

- **Workplace risk assessment:** this is fundamental for successful prevention and should involve preparation, assessment and the implementation of preventive and protective measures. The risk assessment process should be regularly reviewed and updated.
- **A combination of preventive measures to eliminate/control risks:** this should be the top priority for any workplace. As MSDs are caused by multiple factors, a combined approach is best, for instance involving actions targeting the workplace (ergonomics), work organisation (allowing breaks), psychosocial factors (giving workers control over work pace) and workers (providing training on good posture).
- **Encourage worker participation:** workers should be involved in identifying MSD risks and preventive solutions to help companies develop comprehensive policies on MSD management.

Promoting wellbeing at work through personalised information and advice, a risk assessment questionnaire, seminars, workshops and web-based materials would cost approximately £80 per employee per year. For a company with 500 employees, where all employees undergo the intervention, it is estimated that an initial investment of £40,000 would result in a net return of £347,722 in savings, mainly due to reduced presenteeism (lost productivity that occurs due to an employee working while ill) and absenteeism (missing work due to ill health).

**Taken from International Workplace's IOSH Managing Occupational Health and Wellbeing course.⁶*



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > A key element of musculoskeletal risk management is training – making sure that people understand the risks they are exposed to, and what they should do about them.
- > Without properly understanding the risks, people are less likely to work in ways that are safer, but initially seem less convenient.
- > Everyone in the workplace should be involved in identifying risks and coming up with ways of preventing them.

WORKPLACE DESIGN

Providing suitable ergonomic chairs and a variety of furniture to suit various needs, postures and working styles helps to prevent fatigue, eye strain, headaches and stress by controlling environmental conditions.

Poorly fitting office furniture has been linked to an increase in musculoskeletal disorders. Current research underlines the benefits of providing office furniture and equipment that can be adjusted to meet individual requirements.

If employees are expected to sit at a range of different desks, the furniture needs to be fully adjustable so that users can change it to suit their individual ergonomic requirements. Office chairs should offer adjustable arms, height and lumbar support in order to fully support each individual. If their equipment does not have these features, people will either be reluctant to use different desks or, if they do, suffer from problems such as back pain or other musculoskeletal disorders. Computer screens should be on flexible monitor arms, allowing the user to bring their screen to the right eye level in order to avoid eye strain.⁷

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > Ensure employees complete a workstation analysis and set up the workstation for their particular needs.
- > Provide the most appropriate equipment that can be adjusted to each individual's requirements.
- > Hygiene and cleanliness issues should be addressed if multiple people use the same pieces of equipment (such as telephones and keyboards).



RESPONSIBILITIES

When the pandemic hit, those without a home office didn't have much time to prepare. But is it the employee's or employer's responsibility to ensure at-home workspaces are appropriate?

For employees who are working from home, support must be offered by the employer to avoid the risks of MSDs.

The Leesman Index Homeworking Impact Code⁸ revealed that just over 28% of UK employees are operating from a non-work-specific home location. More than a third of office workers claimed they hadn't received any support, advice or equipment from their employer to assist with homeworking during lockdown and a huge 89% of people who are temporarily working from home and are in pain haven't told their employers.

"One of the most important things that employers can do is help staff understand what a suitable home work environment looks like. Not everyone has the ability to have a dedicated home office but it is possible to make adjustments or adaptations to enable people to work in a supported and ergonomic way, whatever the home workplace looks like. Having conversations with workers about the simple ways they can protect themselves from pain and discomfort means that wherever they work from, be it their home, a coffee shop or an agile work space, they will have the knowledge to work comfortably."

Kate Gardner, International Workplace

The law doesn't require employers to conduct home workstation assessments for employees working remotely temporarily. However, they should still offer advice. According to the HSE,⁹ if the homeworking period extends, employers should regularly contact workers to address whether improvements need making and deliver equipment if necessary.

To aid permanent homeworkers, employers must provide information on how to operate comfortably to avoid developing musculoskeletal conditions. Regularly communicating with staff members will help to prevent any long-term issues developing too. On top of this, employers must instruct staff to complete a homeworking risk assessment and a display screen equipment assessment. The company's health and safety policy may also need adjusting to cover homeworking.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > The law doesn't require employers to conduct home workstation assessments for employees working remotely temporarily.
- > However, it is good practice to do so and to regularly ask at-home workers if they need anything or are experiencing issues.
- > Staff that regularly work from home should complete a homeworking risk assessment and a display screen equipment assessment.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Many jobs involve prolonged sitting. The health risks associated with a sedentary lifestyle are well-documented and include increased risks of MSDs and other health problems such as diabetes and heart disease.

Acknowledging many employees will have “lost” their commute time or client visits,¹⁰ becoming more sedentary, the Society of Occupational Medicine makes the following suggestions to help employees move more:

- > Taking video or phone calls standing up or walking around.
- > Planning the day – short gaps between video meetings, job task variety.
- > If no table or chair, taking a break every 30 minutes to move around.
- > Moving includes neck, trunk and arm movements. Brisker activities include repeated sitting to stand from a chair or jumping jacks.
- > Add your commute to the day or “walk” to see a colleague; up and down stairs or marching on the spot. Get some fresh air and walk outside.

Employees who sit for long periods in an office need time to exercise or move around. Being active every day helps to maintain mobility and taking regular exercise can increase energy levels and improve mood.

“People are meant to move. Without movement, not only does the cardiovascular system suffer, but also and in particular the musculoskeletal system. Musculoskeletal conditions are the leading contributor to disability worldwide, with lower back pain being the single leading cause of disability. You can stay in motion while also at your office workplace – switching between sitting, standing, running, lying down and a lot more postures.”

EU-OSHA

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > Integrate more movement into the working day in order to get the full benefits of exercise.
- > Whilst it’s not practical for every workplace to provide a gym, incentives such as cycle to work schemes are available, as well as simply encouraging employees to take the stairs instead of the lift.
- > Provide enough time at lunch times and breaks for team members to visit a local gym, go for a walk or play a sport. Competitions and activities can also build team spirit.
- > Regular exercise can help people sleep better, keep the heart healthy and help with losing weight. It helps to increase stamina, strength and suppleness and keeps joints mobile.

CONCLUSION

Ergonomic-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) account for a third of all employee injury and illness cases and are one of the most common causes of long-term absence.

While the drive to reduce financial costs is crucial, it should not be the sole motivation for improvement. It is also important for employers to consider the human cost that can result from a musculoskeletal injury and their ethical obligations to provide a healthy and safe place of work through effective prevention and management of MSDs.

The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act and Regulations covering DSE and manual handling are prevention-orientated in that their main provisions are focused on risk management, which requires employers to take proactive steps to manage and reduce risk of injury to their employees. Ensuring training is provided so that employees work safely is key to making this happen.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > If workers are habitual users of display screen equipment, employers should carry out a DSE workstation assessment, make sure workers take breaks from DSE work and provide an eye test if a worker asks for one.
- > As MSDs are caused by multiple factors, a combined approach is best, for instance involving actions targeting the workplace (ergonomics), work organisation (allowing breaks), psychosocial factors (giving workers control over work pace) and workers (providing training on good posture).
- > A key element of musculoskeletal risk management is training – making sure that people understand the risks they are exposed to, and what they should do about them.
- > The law doesn't require employers to conduct home workstation assessments for employees working remotely temporarily. However, they should still offer advice. Employers should regularly contact workers to address whether improvements need making and deliver equipment if necessary.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- ¹ [Coronavirus and homeworking in the UK - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk)
- ² [COVID-19 help \(towergatehealthandprotection.co.uk\)](https://towergatehealthandprotection.co.uk)
- ³ [Musculoskeletal disorders | Safety and health at work EU-OSHA \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu)
- ⁴ [Has Homeworking Caused a Surge in Musculoskeletal Conditions? - Arinite](#)
- ⁵ ["Working from home left me with musculoskeletal pain" \(versusarthritis.org\)](https://versusarthritis.org)
- ⁶ [IOSH Managing Occupational Health and Wellbeing training course brought to you by International Workplace](#)
- ⁷ [Five Common Hot-Desking Mistakes and How To Solve Them – Active \(activeworkplacesolutions.co.uk\)](https://activeworkplacesolutions.co.uk)
- ⁸ [Leesman-Impact-Code-Home-30.06.21.pdf \(leesmanindex.com\)](https://leesmanindex.com)
- ⁹ [Homeworkers \(hse.gov.uk\)](https://hse.gov.uk)
- ¹⁰ [The Society of Occupational Medicine](#)



IOSH MANAGING OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING: A new course from International Workplace

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