Wellbeing at work – how to manage your aches and pains

What is musculoskeletal (MSK) pain?

MSK pain is pain that affects the muscles, joints, ligaments, tendons and bones, which are part of the MSK system. You may feel pain after an obvious injury, for example if you trip and fall over, but you may also feel pain when there is no obvious injury, such as an ache or pain in the shoulders after a long day using a computer. When there is no obvious injury or trauma, the painful body part (which is also called tissue) is rarely injured but can become sensitive.

Often diagnosing MSK pain is easy, for example, pain while lifting objects or following a sprained ankle, but occasionally it is not so clear, and in this case advice should be sought from your GP or other qualified healthcare practitioner, such as a physiotherapist.

Any pain associated with other causes, such as infection, organ problems, cancer or gynaecological problems is not classed as MSK pain.

What is pain?

Pain, a highly unpleasant physical sensation, is designed to make you pay attention to a body part, and change your behaviour regarding it. It’s also part of other strategies we have to protect a body part that the body thinks is in danger.

Pain is useful to ensure you change your behaviour to allow a body part to be protected so it can heal, but pain isn’t always an indicator of how injured that body part is. As healing takes place and you start using the body part normally, the pain should get better.

Sensitivity

Occasionally we can feel pain without any obvious injury. For instance, following a strenuous workout in the gym you might wake up with aches or pains in your muscles the next day. We used to think that was ‘micro-muscle damage’ but research has shown that this is not the case; there is no damage – it is actually a chemical reaction causing a stress response making you more sensitive to stimulus. This sensitivity means that you take a few easy days to allow the muscle the chance to get over what you did
to it. Another good example is if you catch the flu virus; your whole body aches, but the whole body is not damaged – it is caused by a change driven by your immune system that is changing how sensitive you are when you are poorly.

**Many things can affect this sensitivity such as:**

- how fatigued or tired your tissue is: if we use a muscle or joint past what it is capable of, it becomes more sensitive
- your level of fitness which dictates a tissue’s capability – the stronger and fitter you are, then the stronger your tissues are
- stress and depression – chronic and uncontrollable stress makes you more sensitive
- abdominal obesity – body fat around the abdomen is now thought to cause inflammatory changes that make you more sensitive
- sleep – lack of sleep makes you more sensitive to pain
- diet – a highly processed and refined food diet is thought to make you more sensitive.

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**How STRESS Affects The BODY**

**SKIN**  
skin problems like acne, psoriasis, eczema, dermatitis, random breakouts, and skin rashes

**STOMACH**  
can cause peptic ulcer disease, IBD, IBS, food allergies, stomach cramps, reflux, nausea and weight fluctuations

**PANCREAS**  
results in elevated secretions of insulin, which if chronic could lead to diabetes, damaged arteries and obesity

**IMMUNE SYSTEM**  
suppressed effectiveness of the immune system to battle and recover from illness. Leads to high levels of inflammation in the body, which causes a variety of chronic health conditions

**HEAD**  
issues with mood, anger, depression, irritability, lack of energy, concentration problems, anxiety and panic attacks

**HEART**  
increased blood pressure, fast heart beat, increased risk of heart attack and stroke, and higher cholesterol

**INTESTINES**  
decreased nutrient absorption, reduced metabolism, decreased enzymatic output, increased risk for inflammatory bowel diseases, diabetes, and more

**REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM**  
decreased testosterone and estradiol production leading to reduced fertility. Dampening of sexual behaviour and loss of sexual drive

**JOINTS & MUSCLES**  
aches and pains, inflammation, tension, lowered bone density (propensity for osteoporosis), tightness in the shoulders and back
How can you manage longer term pain issues?

The pain associated with injured tissue normally improves quite quickly, however pain associated with sensitive tissue can persist for a long time; it can come and go, often for no reason, and can be very distressing.

Language that is used around pain can be quite frightening, but often what is seen on X-rays and other imaging is not as fearful as it sounds, and when strategies are in place to desensitise and improve fitness, things can improve.

We know that ongoing pain tends to be a pain sensitivity problem where the body also becomes over-protective of the tissue. Over-protection can be complicated and involves lots of bodily systems, however evidence is now emerging that if we use interventions aimed at reducing protective behaviours then people can and do improve.

Desensitising strategies can include:

- learning to move again with confidence and without protective behaviours
- addressing lifestyle factors like sleep, diet and fitness
- addressing negative beliefs by exploring our attitudes, beliefs and behaviours about our body.

If we truly believe we are fragile, and therefore can be easily injured, we will be more likely to show protective behaviours.

It is useful to differentiate between pain related to tissue injury and pain that is not, as you need to give an injured tissue rest in order to heal; but sensitive tissue often needs the opposite!

Yes, pain is complex and often difficult to predict, but one thing we do know is that pain is not a reliable indicator of tissue damage. It is perfectly possible to have pain and not be damaging yourself, but if you are in any doubt, then speak with a GP or other healthcare provider who can assess you.

When should you see your GP or other qualified health care practitioner?

The majority of problems improve without medical help and are easily self-managed. However, there are occasions when you should seek the opinion of a medical professional:

- following an injury or trauma where the pain does not subside after 3-4 weeks
- when you have pain that does not subside with changes in position or use, or constant night pain
- muscle weakness, particularly if your bladder and bowel function changes, or if you have numbness or pins and needles
- fever, feeling unwell or having unexplained weight loss
- you are particularly concerned and anxious.

If you are worried, stressed or anxious about your pain then it’s important that you speak to someone. Often simple reassurance and some pain control strategies are all it takes to get you on the road to recovery.

A range of support is available from the Centre for Occupational Health and Wellbeing (COHWB) for those with MSK pain problems within the Trust. Below is advice for both managers and employees who may be suffering with MSK pain.

**Section 1: Manager of an individual with pain**

*Your responsibilities as a manager if the staff member is not in work*

As soon as you are aware of an employee being off work due to MSK pain, contact them and discuss the issues with them, and if you both feel it is appropriate, and consent is given, make a management referral to COHWB. This is particularly useful because you can request advice on specific issues in order to help support the member of staff back to work in a timely manner. If neither you nor the employee feel a management referral is required you can advise the employee that COHWB offers a fast-track self-referral physiotherapy service that they can attend for advice and support if required (priority is given to employees with a work-related MSK problem).

For a minor problem where a management referral is not deemed necessary, agree a review date within seven days for a progress report. If the employee has recovered well and is functionally unrestricted, then a referral to COHWB is not required, unless you have ongoing doubts about the individual’s fitness to carry out their role.

If amended duties can be provided, discuss what aspects of the individual’s role they feel they can reasonably achieve and if it is safe and reasonably practicable then the employee can return to work. As a manager you can seek support and advice from COHWB if you are unsure of your decision for an individual to return to work.

If recovery is not as expected and the absence may become long-term, refer to COHWB

On return from absenteeism, refer to and follow the guidance in the Trust’s Sickness Absence Policy

*If a staff member is in work, but you suspect they are in pain*

Initiate a discussion with the employee and assess the situation. This assessment should consider the risk to the individual, their colleagues, service-users and the Trust.

If you consider their function to be limited or impaired, and it is compromising their safety or the safety of others, then there are two options; you can amend their duties in accordance with what is safe and what they are reasonably capable of, or you can send the employee home. Contact COHWB for advice if required.

If duties have been amended these can be time-limited, and if the problem persists you can refer to COHWB with the individual’s consent.

If an employee is in pain, but is still able to fulfil their full role safely and is willing to continue, then you
need take no action, however you should make them aware of the option to access support from services such as their GP or the Trust’s Physiotherapy Services. Pain is not a contra-indication to work and need not be feared.

You may also wish to refer to the Moving and Handling Policy available on the Intranet for advice and support on completing relevant moving and handling risk assessments including load handling, people handling or workstation risk assessment depending on its relevance to the specific situation and the individual’s role.

**Section 2: Individual with musculoskeletal pain**

Do you feel safe and able to carry out all aspects or your role?

*If the answer is no:*  
- seek medical attention if you think it relevant to do so (e.g. NHS website, your GP)  
- do not attempt to carry out the parts of your role that you think unsafe, are unable to do and might put you, a service-user or a colleague at significant risk  
- have a discussion with your manager and discuss those aspects of your role that you feel are unsafe.

The discussion with your manager should be addressing the duties you are reasonably able to achieve in order for you to remain in work. Agree a time to review any adjustments made.

There is the option to self-refer to fast-track physiotherapy via COHWB. Discuss with your manager if a management referral is relevant. If a referral is not relevant, a time-limit to review the situation should be in place. If you cannot achieve a resolution, your manager should refer you to COHWB for advice.

You may also wish to refer to the Moving and Handling Policy available on the Intranet for advice and support on completing relevant moving and handling risk assessments, including load handling, people handling or work station risk assessment depending on its relevance to the specific situation and your role.

*If you feel that you can carry out your tasks but you are in pain:*  
You are under no obligation to tell anyone about your pain; how you manage it is for you to decide, however there is support the Trust can offer. A fast-track physiotherapy service is available, and this can be accessed via a self-referral to COHWB with full confidentiality.

**Mental wellbeing**

If you are a manager of staff, or of a service, you can join the ever-increasing number of managers who have attended the ‘Creating a mentally healthy workplace’ workshops, which aim to:

- raise awareness of mental health  
- explore what is meant by mentally healthy workplace  
- understand the impact of work on mental health  
- explore and understand the importance of manager behaviour for mental health  
- plan how to positively influence the workplace.

The next workshop is scheduled for 13 December: [sign-up through e-LMS](mailto:sign-up@ouh.nhs.uk).

For further information contact [anna.hinton@ouh.nhs.uk](mailto:anna.hinton@ouh.nhs.uk)
Feedback from these workshop include ‘an essential workshop’; ‘opened my eyes – the words you use are so powerful in making people feel listened to and appreciated’; ‘I enjoyed the whole training and made me more confident to input into my team’.

Some useful stretches

www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/lower-back-pain-exercises

Computer & Desk Stretches
Approximately 4 Minutes

Sitting at a computer for long periods often causes neck and shoulder stiffness and occasionally lower back pain. Do these stretches every hour or so throughout the day, or whenever you feel stiff. Photocopy this and keep it in a drawer. Also, be sure to get up and walk around the office whenever you think of it. You’ll feel better!

1. 10–20 seconds
   2 times

2. 10–15 seconds

3. 8–10 seconds each side

4. 15–20 seconds

5. 3–5 seconds
   3 times

6. 10–12 seconds each arm

7. 10 seconds

8. 10 seconds

9. 8–10 seconds each side

10. 8–10 seconds each side

11. 10–15 seconds
    2 times

12. Shake out hands
    8–10 seconds

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Employment Assistance Programme

Home life can be challenging at times, as can work life, so if you or your staff are struggling with stresses don’t forget the ‘free to use by you’ Employment Assistance Programme, also accessed via the front page of the intranet.

Useful information, advice, guidance and support and on a whole range of personal issues that might be a source of stress at home, including money worries or relationships.

Staff say it has been an excellent resource: ‘as it is a 24/7 helpline too – do persevere through the initial ‘call centre’ feel to it – it is incredibly helpful’.

Mindfulness

The Centre for Occupational Health facilitates Mindfulness courses three times a year at a greatly reduced cost of £80 for a six-week course.

The next one starts on 15 January 2019 and runs on a Tuesday evening from 6.00pm - 7.30pm at the JR. To be added to the list for January please email anna.hinton@ouh.nhs.uk

Walking

Despite the colder, darker days, even when you are not feeling like it, do try and keep on walking. Walking, especially amongst the greenery, improves your mood and reduces stress. Only 24 days until it gets lighter again every day...

Please print this newsletter and put it in your staff room.