



Corporate Health

Three Strategies for Reducing Musculoskeletal Injuries in the Workplace

By Craig Shepherd, OTR/L
Occupational Therapist
TriHealth Work Capacity Services

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, work-related musculoskeletal disorders account for one-third of all occupational injuries and illnesses. The U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration reports that repetitive strain injuries are the most costly occupational health problem in the country, affecting hundreds of thousands of workers annually at a worker's compensation cost estimated at over \$20 billion.

With a growing employee population beyond the age of 55 and economic factors that could have many working well past retirement age, it's in your company's best interest to prevent problems before they occur.

Here are three strategies to help do just that:

1) Use Sound Ergonomic Principles

The greatest single impact you and your company can have on the reduction of work-related musculoskeletal disorders is the application of sound ergonomic principles.

This begins with developing a knowledge of your risk factors ---and the ergonomic tools, equipment and resources available for the abatement of those risk factors. It's important for your safety team to be aware of opportunities for ergonomic improvements and to proactively respond to identified concerns.

There are a multitude of assessment tools available to aid in the identification of problem areas and to even quantify the risk relative to a specific area of the body. Working with an occupational health provider who understands the concepts and relationship of force, posture, repetition and recovery time (among other factors) can ensure that one risk factor is not simply replaced by another.

Front-line employees must play a part in ergonomic initiatives involving their work environment, as they are performing the tasks every day and can be a valuable resource in problem-solving and implementing successful interventions. An employee feedback process can be extremely helpful in alerting the safety team to potential issues.

Interventions should address the needs of the entire employee population exposed to the identified risk. There are human body measurement differences throughout a

population, and if you design a program for the average height, the other ends of the population curve are left out.

2) Train and Reinforce Proper Body Mechanics and Joint Protection Principles

The debate continues regarding the efficacy of body mechanics training in reducing the incidence of back injuries associated with material handling tasks. I'm a proponent of providing employees with every feasible ergonomic, behavioral and administrative resource to enhance their margin of safety. In my opinion, knowledge of proper posture and mechanics empowers the employee and can pay great dividends, particularly in situations where ergonomic design solutions have been more challenging. These techniques can also be applied beyond the work environment during activities of daily living or leisure pursuits.

3) Implement Safety Protocols and Accountability

It's important to ensure that proper safety protocols are in place and consistent training is occurring to avoid potential job hazards. Thorough Job Hazard Assessments are at the foundation of this process. Training should include ways to measure competencies, and all employees must be accountable for compliance with the safety initiatives and Standard Operating Procedures. This would include consistent use of the appropriate Personal Protective Equipment.

If ongoing compliance is an issue, the safety team needs to explore all elements that could be contributing to that outcome. Ongoing employee safety education serves to reinforce the importance of adherence to a particular protocol and allows feedback on possible areas for improvement. This also engages the employee in the process and better ensures ownership of the proposed solutions to potential hazards in the work environment.

TriHealth's Work Capacity Program, a service of TriHealth Corporate Health, provides a variety of services that prevent injuries, support the return of injured or disabled workers to the workforce, and enable employers to lower costs, increase productivity and improve the bottom line.

To learn more, contact Account Manager Rosa Cierra at 513-977-0042;
rosa_cierra@trihealth.com