

Labour Department  
Occupational Safety and Health Section

# RETURNING TO WORK AFTER MUSCULOSKELETAL DISORDER

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## WHAT ARE WORK RELATED MUSCULOSKELTAL DISORDERS?

Musculoskeletal disorders are injuries that affect the musculoskeletal system (muscles, tendons, ligaments and nerves). The injury develops over time and is caused by continuous exposure of the musculoskeletal system to activities with particular risk factors such as working in awkward postures repetitively. If left untreated, the problem progresses from mild to untreatable.

## SYMPTOMS OF WORK RELATED MUSCULOSKELETAL DISORDERS

Pain is the most common symptom associated with musculoskeletal disorders. In some cases there may be joint stiffness, muscle tightness, tenderness and swelling of the affected area. Some persons may also experience sensations of "pins and needles," numbness, skin colour changes, and decreased sweating of the hands.

## WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS

Various factors are thought to be associated with musculoskeletal disorders, including:

- ◆ repetitive and/or heavy lifting
- ◆ bending and twisting
- ◆ repeating an action too frequently
- ◆ uncomfortable working position
- ◆ exerting too much force
- ◆ adverse working environment (e.g. hot or cold)
- ◆ psychosocial factors (e.g. high job demands, time pressures and lack of control)

## BEST PRACTICES FOR RETURNING AN INJURED EMPLOYEE TO WORK

### 1. Obtain work capacities and restrictions

In order to know if adjustments to duties are needed, ask the employee to share any information he obtains from the health care professional pertaining to his work capacities and restrictions. Provide the employee with a letter requesting the information that is needed.

### 2. Make changes to the job if necessary

Most factors that contribute to musculoskeletal disorders can be controlled by implementing the recommendations of an ergonomic or manual handling assessment. The assessment should be done for all persons conducting the job to reduce the likelihood of them being injured. Review operation manuals to ensure that equipment is being used as designed; stick to maintenance schedule. Making changes (modifying duties, work hours, restrict some body movements, lifting restrictions) would enable the employee to stay in his original job without aggravating the injury.

If the employee has been injured to the point that he can no longer safely perform his job then explore reassigning the employee to an equivalent position that the employee can manage.

### 3. Implement and monitor the changes

A return to work program can run smoothly with adequate planning and involvement of his coworkers so they would be less stressed. The coworkers' workload can be reduced by assigning the less strenuous parts of several different jobs to the recovering worker. Continue to communicate and make adjustments until the desired outcome is achieved.

## BENEFITS OF A RETURN TO WORK PROGRAM

There are social and financial benefits of having persons return to work after experiencing musculoskeletal injury. The worker feels valued and is able to earn without depending on National Insurance. This worker feels a sense of job security and staff morale is increased. The company benefits by retaining the experience, skills and knowledge of the worker without having to spend money to recruit and train someone else.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. *Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and other life threatening illnesses in the workplace;*
2. *Ministry of Labour website brochures (<https://labour.gov.bb>) :*
  - *Ergonomics;*
  - *Manual handling;*
  - *Preventing back pain;*
  - *Ergonomics of workplace seating;*
  - *Risk assessment*