



Healthy  
Workplaces  
**LIGHTEN THE LOAD**



## Working with chronic musculoskeletal disorders

### Key Points

- Rheumatic and musculoskeletal disorders (RMDs) are one of the most common chronic health conditions — as the working population ages, more workers are likely to have a chronic condition.
- Too often, chronic health conditions lead to early exit from work; but, with the right employer, attitudes and workplace adjustments, combined with support from the public-health system, many people with chronic conditions can continue working.
- Many adjustments are easy and cheap to implement.
- Health and safety measures that make work safer and easier for the entire workforce can enable an individual with reduced work capacity to remain in employment.
- Simple measures to help an individual remain in work can often benefit the whole workforce.
- Occupational safety and health has a role in supporting those with chronic conditions to remain at work.

All info sheets and other campaign materials are available to download from EU-OSHA's Healthy Workplaces Campaign website (<https://healthy-workplaces.eu>).

### Healthy Workplaces Lighten the Load

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) is running a Europe-wide campaign from 2020 to 2022 to raise awareness of work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and the importance of preventing them. The objective is to encourage employers, workers and other stakeholders to work together to prevent MSDs and to promote good musculoskeletal health among EU workers.

## What are rheumatic and musculoskeletal disorders (RMDs)?

RMDs are chronic problems that affect the muscles, bones, joints and soft tissues, such as rheumatism, arthritis, osteoporosis and fibromyalgia, which can affect work or be aggravated by work but are not directly caused by work. Their causes include inflammatory diseases, ageing, injuries, and congenital and developmental conditions. If the precise cause of musculoskeletal pain is unclear, it is described as shoulder pain, back pain, etc. Conditions caused or aggravated by work are referred to as work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs).

## Workers with rheumatic and musculoskeletal disorders

As the average age of the workforce and retirement ages increase, the number of workers with a chronic health condition will also increase, which increases the need for employers to retain workers. However, too many people exit work early because of a chronic health condition, when a few simple adaptation and support measures could allow them to continue working.

## Employers' responsibilities

**Equality legislation** requires employers to provide reasonable accommodation to employees with disabilities, such as providing equipment, adapting hours of work, changing tasks or providing training. Some countries have more detailed requirements, including regarding return to work following sick leave.

**Health and safety regulations** require employers to prevent risks, based on risk assessments. The priority is to eliminate risks at source and take collective measures to make work safer and healthier for all workers. This is important, as measures to make work easier for all workers could enable someone with a chronic health condition to continue working. Particularly sensitive groups, such as workers with chronic conditions, must be protected against hazards that specifically affect them. However, making workplaces more inclusive for all workers, e.g. when buying equipment, planning tasks or altering buildings, reduces the need to make adjustments for individuals. Regulations setting minimum health and safety standards for workplaces include requirements to make workplaces accessible for workers with disabilities.

Useful links for information on risk assessment and workers with disabilities:

- EU-OSHA, Factsheet 53 — Ensuring the health and safety of workers with disabilities (<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/factsheet-53-ensuring-health-and-safety-workers-disabilities/view>);
- EU-OSHA, Factsheet 87 — Workforce diversity and risk assessment (<https://osha.europa.eu/no/publications/factsheet-87-workforce-diversity-and-risk-assessment-ensuring-everyone-covered-summary>).

## The impact of rheumatic and musculoskeletal disorders

RMDs cause pain affecting the arms, legs, neck or back — the pain is not always severe but is often persistent, nagging and wearing. It may vary, often unpredictably. The pain can make repetitive movements difficult. RMDs often cause stiffness, with those suffering taking a while to get moving. Sleep can be disturbed, which can make it more difficult to ignore the pain. People can become tired and fatigued particularly with an inflammatory disease or if sleep is disturbed. Being stressed, anxious or depressed because of the pain or for other reasons also makes it harder to ignore the pain. People with an RMD often worry about the future, in relation to whether their limitations will worsen or they will lose their job. Some conditions are characterised by flare-ups, so the worker will have good and bad days. However, people do not have to be 100 % fit to work, and those with chronic RMDs can learn to work around their problems and, with the right adjustments, can usually continue to work.

### TESTIMONIAL

#### *'Work has been fantastic'*

A worker with degenerative osteoarthritis of the spine resulting in two knee replacements now has her own workstation, adapted to her needs. Working flexi-hours means not having to drive in rush hour traffic. She is fully supported by all her colleagues.



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## What employers can do

Most workers with an RMD are able to continue working in some form, provided some allowance is made for their symptoms and there is flexibility so that ways of overcoming the challenges posed can be found. Continuing to work within their ability will not worsen their condition. In general, being in work is good for mental and physical health. Such workers often are productive and try to avoid missing work. The gain for the employer is the retention of experienced, skilled workers.

The ultimate goal is to create a workplace that:

- recognises the importance of work-related MSDs and reduces risks, in particular for workers who may already have a musculoskeletal problem;
- takes preventive action — assessing and reducing risks to make sure the workplace is safe and designed to promote good musculoskeletal health;
- takes action to reduce stress at work;
- encourages early intervention for any musculoskeletal problem;
- makes reasonable adjustments and supports individuals to manage their own health so that people can continue to work despite their condition;
- supports a worker who is absent because of a chronic condition to get back to work through effective return-to-work planning;
- promotes musculoskeletal health, e.g. encourages back care and physical activity, tackles prolonged sedentary work and enables workers to take short breaks, and supports workers to lead healthier lifestyles.

To achieve this, a workplace should:

- minimise risks and recognise that employees with RMDs may be more susceptible;
- avoid tasks involving prolonged static postures, sedentary behaviour or repetitive movements;
- ensure that workers avoid risks by following safe techniques and safe practices, using the right equipment and not taking shortcuts;
- plan workplace accommodations by focusing on an individual's work ability (an individual's capabilities not their disabilities);
- take a joined-up approach that involves the employee, their healthcare team and their line manager, with the common goal of helping them to stay at work and work within their abilities;
- promote a culture of open conversation;
- train managers and workers to understand musculoskeletal health, RMDs and ways of supporting colleagues to remain in work.

## Early intervention and early access to advice

The earlier a problem is reported, the easier it is to deal with; an employer cannot take action if they are not aware of the problem. This means encouraging and enabling employees to disclose health problems as soon as they arise, assuring them that they will be listened to and supported. If someone has a persistent musculoskeletal problem that affects their work, they should be encouraged to seek medical advice as soon as possible. Medical advice, if shared with permission, should help the employer to understand what support the worker needs.

## Open conversations

A worker's needs will become clearer through good communication. A conversation between an individual and their manager about a health condition could cover the following:

- the condition;
- the symptoms experienced;
- if the symptoms vary, how they feel on a good or bad day;
- the effects of medication;
- what tasks they find challenging and need help with;
- what support they need or might need to do their job now and in the future.

### PRACTICAL TOOL

#### *MSD discussions at work*

Conversation starters for workplace discussions about MSDs includes advice for managers and employees on how to discuss a musculoskeletal health problem (<https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/conversation-starters-workplace-discussionsabout/view>)

## Getting advice and support

Advice available from public services and health disability organisations can be helpful in finding solutions. Some countries have return-to-work support schemes and work accident insurance services that offer advice, support with return-to-work plans and grants for workplace adaptations. The worker's healthcare team should give advice on what tasks are appropriate and what should be avoided.

## Simple adjustments in the workplace

Workers need to be given opportunities to find ways of working around their problems and to try things out on a trial-and-error basis, with enough time being allowed for this. Some examples of adjustments are listed below.

### Changing duties and tasks:

- finding alternative ways of doing tasks;
- swapping or rotating tasks with colleagues;
- taking regular short breaks;
- reducing or avoiding activities that are difficult or that worsen symptoms (e.g. use of stairs, prolonged standing or sitting, and repetitive activities);
- pacing work to prevent fatigue, avoiding last minute deadlines.

### Equipment and workplace adaptations:

- adapting computer equipment, e.g. using an ergonomic mouse, an ergonomic keyboard or voice-activated software;
- providing a portable perching stool to avoid the need for prolonged standing;
- improving workplace accessibility, e.g. with handrails, door handles, automatic doors;
- repositioning workplace equipment and furniture to reduce strain;
- using adaptive controls for driving;
- wearing comfortable footwear.

### Altering working hours:

- flexible or reduced hours, e.g. starting and finishing later to avoid rush-hour travel or if symptoms are worse in the morning;
- working from home, at least on some days;
- flexible working and teleworking arrangements for all workers.

### Providing support:

- occasional time off for medical appointments (having a flexible working policy facilitates this);
- opportunities for training and to change roles;
- somewhere to move and stretch;
- a car parking space close to the work entrance;
- a change in office location to avoid stairs or walking.

Some adjustments may be needed only temporarily. After adjustments are made, they should be reviewed with the worker and whether any further adjustments are needed, discussed. Needs should be reassessed if conditions change, which make new aspects of work difficult.

Support following MSD-related absence should include a return-to-work plan. A gradual return to work and a temporary reduction in hours can be helpful, following long-term sickness absence.

## Further information

OSHwiki article on working with RMDs:

[https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Working\\_with\\_rheumatic\\_and\\_musculoskeletal\\_diseases\\_\(RMDs\)](https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Working_with_rheumatic_and_musculoskeletal_diseases_(RMDs))

OSHwiki article on managing low back pain:

[https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Managing\\_low\\_back\\_conditions\\_and\\_low\\_back\\_pain](https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Managing_low_back_conditions_and_low_back_pain)

Advice for employers on return to work for workers with cancer:

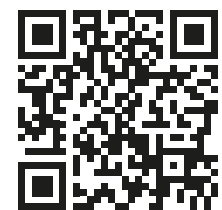
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/advice-employers-return-work-workers-cancer/view>  
(provides general advice on return-to-work)

Thematic section on preventing and managing MSDs:

<https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/musculoskeletal-disorders>

Research on MSDs section for reports and case studies on working with chronic MSDs:

<https://osha.europa.eu/en/research-work-related-msds>



[www.healthy-workplaces.eu](http://www.healthy-workplaces.eu)