

Musculoskeletal Health in the Workplace



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MSK Aware[®] - a programme to enable people to have full and productive
working
lives through promoting musculoskeletal health and preventing
work loss due to musculoskeletal problems

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Musculoskeletal health in the workplace:

a guide for employers

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<http://wellbeing.bitc.org.uk/all-resources/toolkits/musculoskeletal-health-toolkit-employers>

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But why?

- 1 in 8 working age people affected by MSK problems
- 23% of all working days lost because of MSK problems
- 33% of long-term sickness absence attributed to MSK
- Many people stay in work with MSK problems but with difficulty and reduced efficiency / productivity (presenteeism)
- Many leave the workforce early because of MSK conditions with only 60% in employment v 80% healthy people
- This costs – sick pay, lost productivity, retraining costs **and people's quality of life**

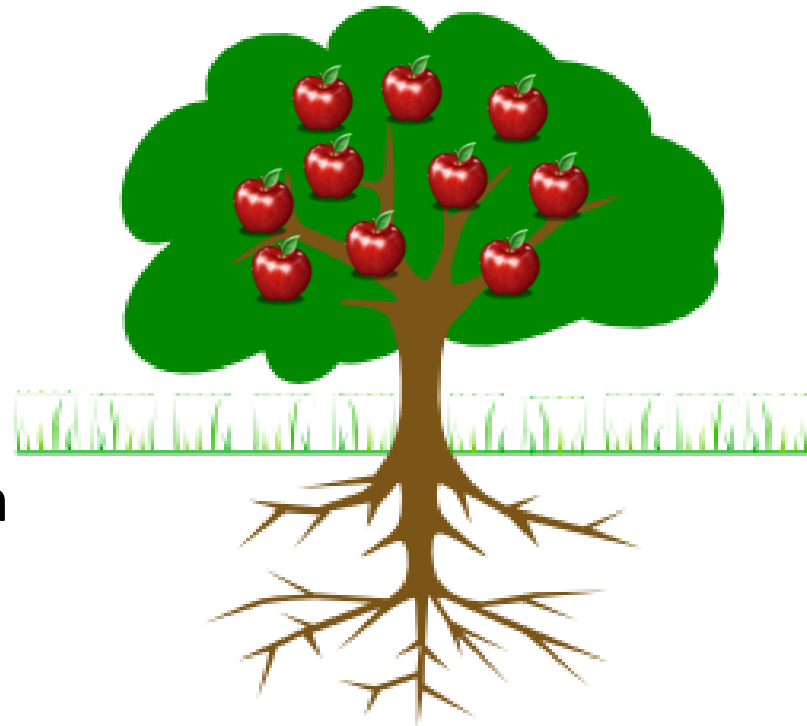


because good musculoskeletal (MSK) health is integral to a full and healthy working life

The musculoskeletal system is the roots and trunk of the tree

It gives us mobility, dexterity and agility and enables us to walk, run, stand, sit, lift and carry

The fruit is good physical & mental health, health and wellbeing, activities of daily living, work and economic independence



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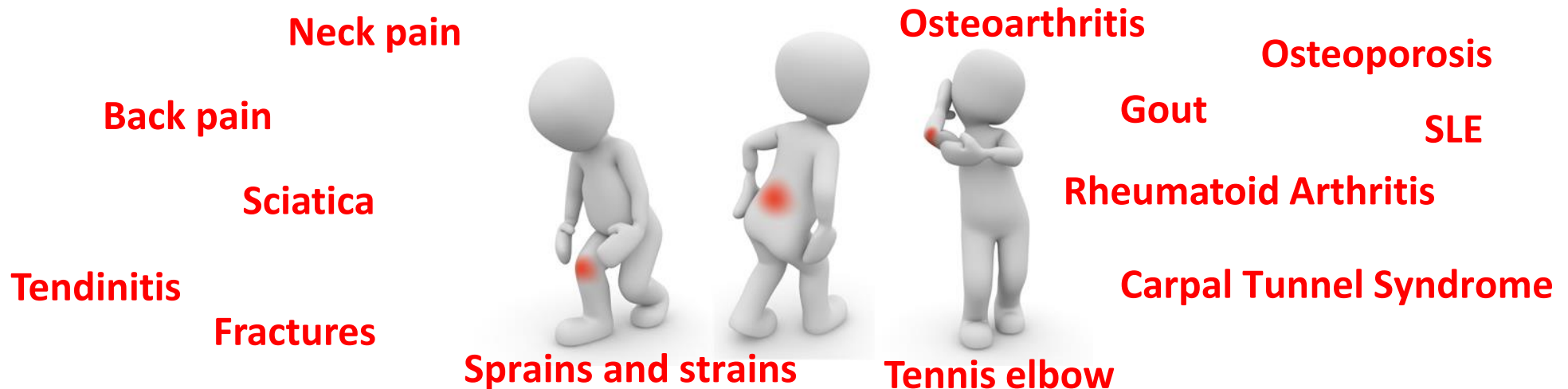
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MSK health is essential for all kinds of work **affecting all industries and business sectors**

What are MSK conditions

- MSK conditions affect bones, joints, muscles, tendons and the tissues that connect them.
- associated with pain and impaired physical function.
- may be acute and short-lived (injuries); recurrent (back pain) and some long-term.
- more common as people get older.
- some MSK problems directly related to work
- many people have MSK problems that happen independently of work but may affect their ability to work.
- MSK and mental health problems are often interrelated.



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'Ferrari without wheels'

"I describe suffering from musculoskeletal disorders as being like a Ferrari without wheels," says Prof Woolf, who is also the chair of Bone and Joint Decade. "If you don't have mobility and dexterity, it doesn't matter how healthy the rest of your body is."



THINKSTOCK

Recurrent MSKs account for 60% of permanent work incapacity in the EU

Snowball effect

The rest of the body is likely to suffer too. Having an MSK dramatically increases the likelihood of suffering from depression, says the Work Foundation.

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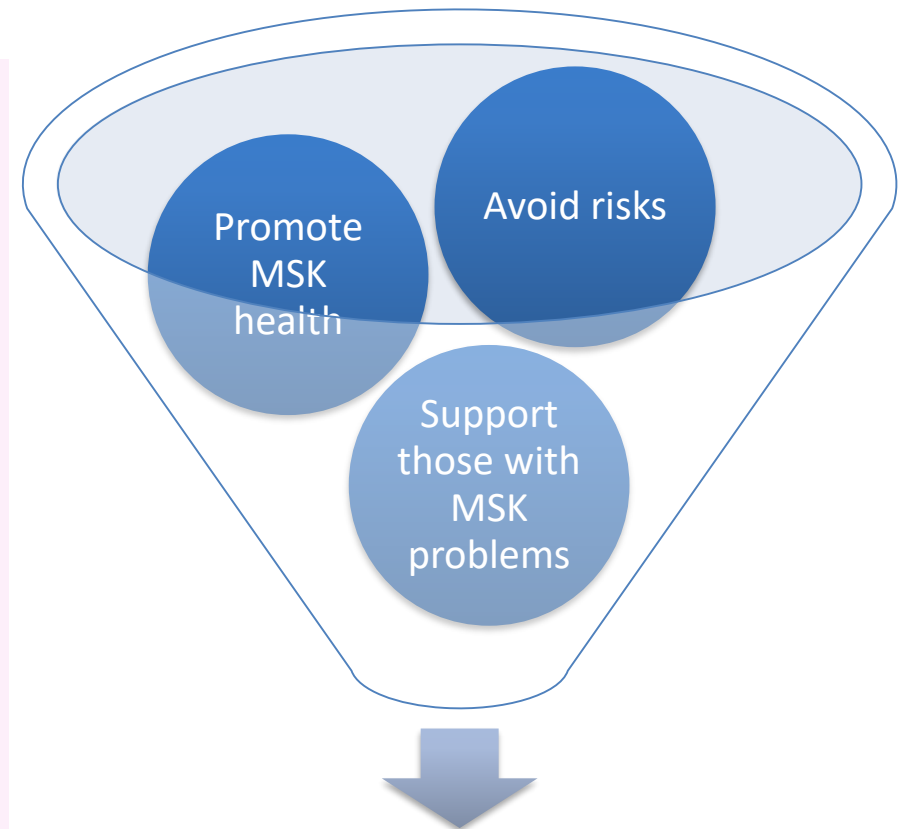
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What is needed to prevent work loss due to MSK problems?

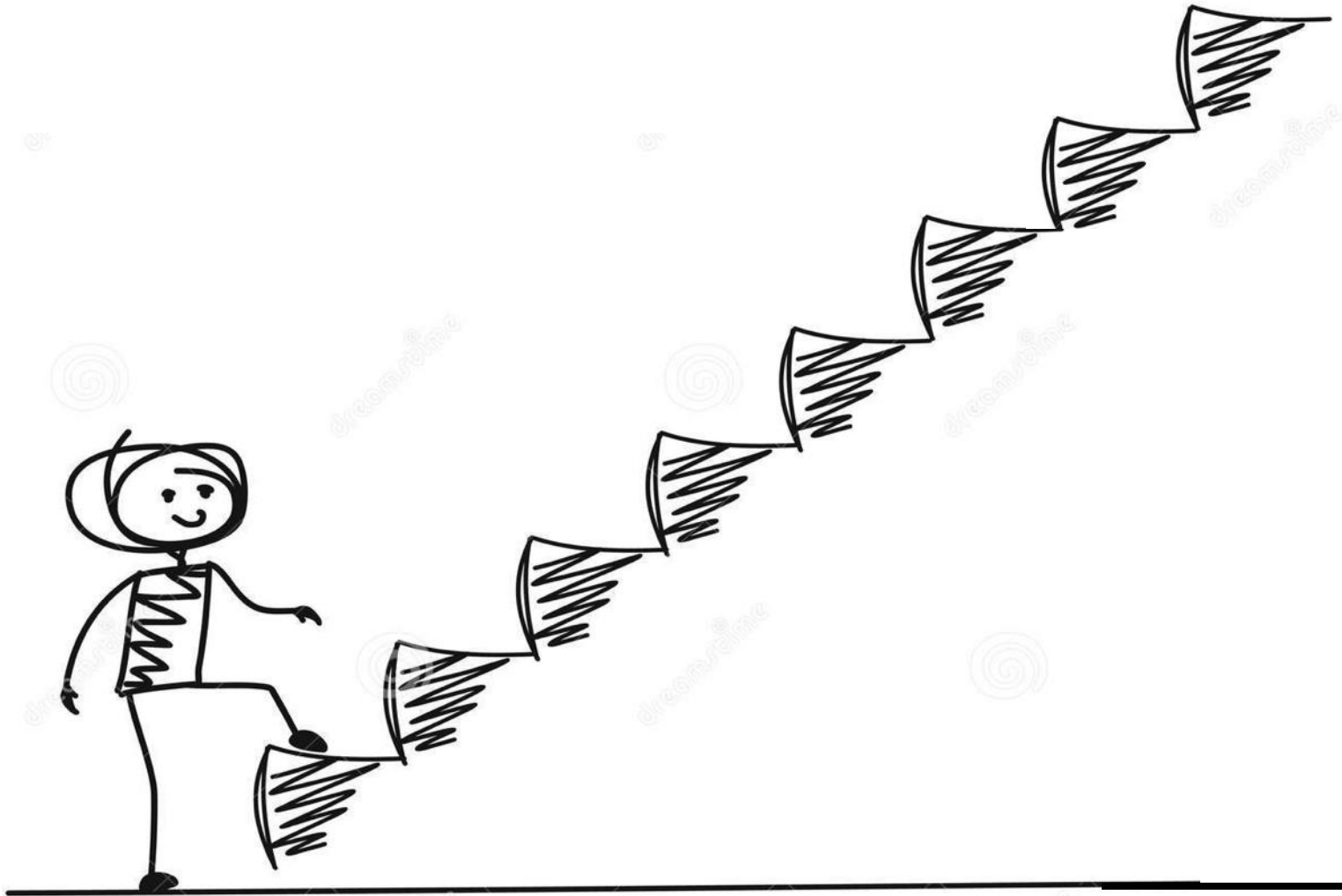
- Preventing workloss due to MSK problems needs a **proactive approach to preventing an MSK problem occurring** and **preventing work loss if a problem arises**.
- This needs not just reducing **the risks of injury** in the workplace but also **promoting health and wellbeing** in the worker and the workplace and **supporting employees** who have a problem.
- It is about **helping employees to help themselves**
- **Small and medium sized firms** (SMEs) can be disproportionately affected through the loss of key staff for any period of time because of MSK problems, so supporting MSK health is especially important.



Prevent workloss

Helping you help yourself

8 steps to being MSK Aware



Step 1

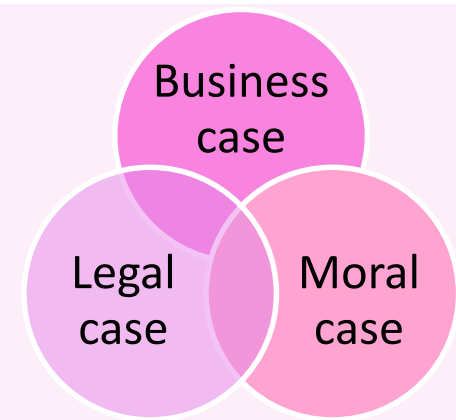
Recognise the importance of MSK problems and the risks within your workplace

- ✓ **The MSK problems of your workforce:** sickness records, staff surveys and appraisals
- ✓ **The characteristics of the work:** physical and mental demands of tasks, variations in workload, shift patterns, work settings
- ✓ **The characteristics of your workforce:** age spectrum, experience, gender, fitness, mixture of skills and expertise, retention, staff shortages,

Do you, as employers, have all the information?

The case for addressing MSK health

There is a **strong business case** to support the workforce



MSK problems represent a substantial cost to your business through:

- > Sick pay
- > Lost productivity
- > Loss of key skills
- > Retraining costs
- > Legal costs and injury benefit



This represents a significant opportunity for cost reduction, since:

- > MSK problems are manageable and can be prevented
- > litigation can be avoided as preventing MSK problems often is a health and safety requirement.

but the **moral case is significant**. Employers owe a **legal duty of care** to their employees, which means that they should take all reasonable steps to ensure their health, safety and wellbeing.

The best employers recognise the need to go beyond legislated minimum standards. It supports **recruitment and retention** of employees. It boost **productivity**.

Step 2

Open conversations

- ✓ **Have open conversations:** people suffer in silence for too long and then, when they do go off work, it is likely to be for a long time. Enable and encourage employees to talk about a MSK problem as soon as it arises so you can then act to help. An open culture will also identify risks in the workplace.

Open communication is essential

An open, positive culture should be central to your approach to MSK problems. A workplace with an open and positive culture enables an employer to know if there are problems in the workplace. An open culture enables an employee to look after their own MSK health, receive early treatment and support, and continue to work even if they have some limitations.

An open culture needs to be led from the top, with a clear signal from senior management that the organisation cares about the wellbeing of all employees, at all levels.

Beginning the conversation Knowing where to start can be a challenge



The challenge

'it's what I do - an inevitable part of a repetitive, physically strenuous job'

'it's my age'

'nothing can be done'

'I don't want to be seen to be complaining or talk about my health at work'

'I've got to learn to live with it'



Step 3

Reduce risks in the workplace

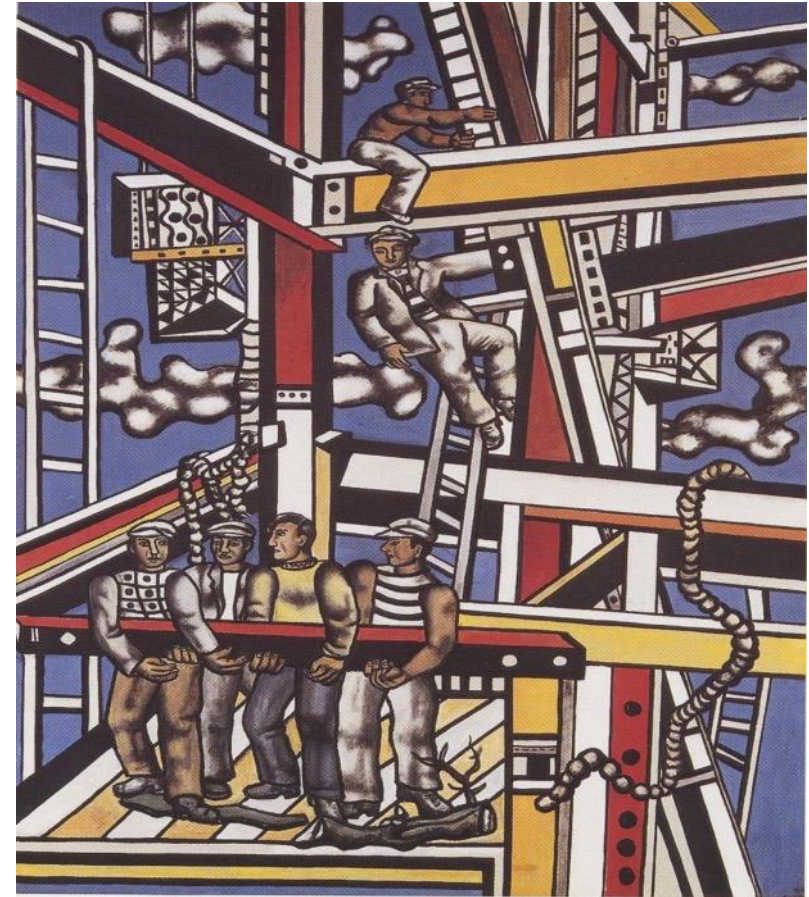
For employers the most important aspect of prevention is reducing workplace risks and hazards



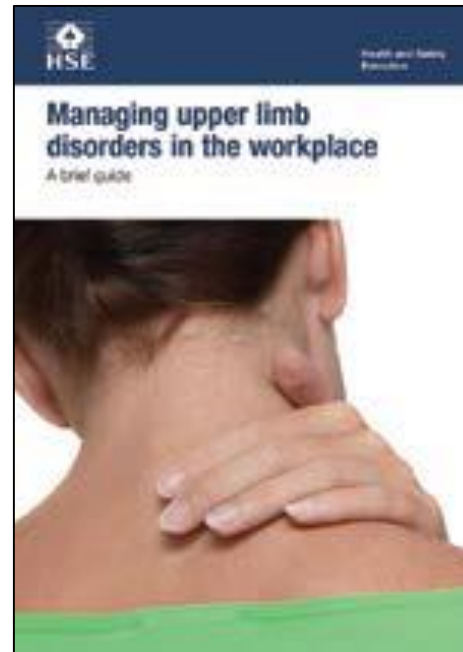
- ✓ **Match** the employee's capabilities and the demands of the job.
 - ✓ **Equip** employees with the necessary skills to cope with the demands of their job, through training and other support.
 - ✓ **Encourage** all employees to place a high value on **health** and **safety** at work.
 - ✓ **Understand the law** for example, obligations relating to risk assessment and safety committee regulations.
-

Employers have a legal duty to provide safe workplaces

- Work that is unsafe or provides inadequate training and support for staff to do their job without injury can lead to MSK problems through both acute injury or repetitive strain. Bad work practices are also often inefficient.
- Work that is physically demanding and/or with high levels of stress impact on the person's health, their ability to work at their most productive and are associated with high levels of work loss.



HSE Tools to prevent MSDs



Prevention also means early conversations about risks

Early identification of physical capability problems of employees

Conversations between employees and their managers should identify when there is a physical capability issue.

A survey by Arthritis Research UK in 2016 found that people 'put up and shut up' and suffer in silence when it comes to workplace health.

Step 4

Promote MSK health in the workplace



- Prevention is also by helping employees stay healthy.
- Support staff to reduce their lifestyle risk factors will also reduce risk of MSK harm at home as well as work.



Increase physical activity



Improve diets, enabling people to achieve an ideal body weight



Encourage employees to stop smoking and reduce alcohol consumption



Reduce stress



Also good for staying healthy

Step 4

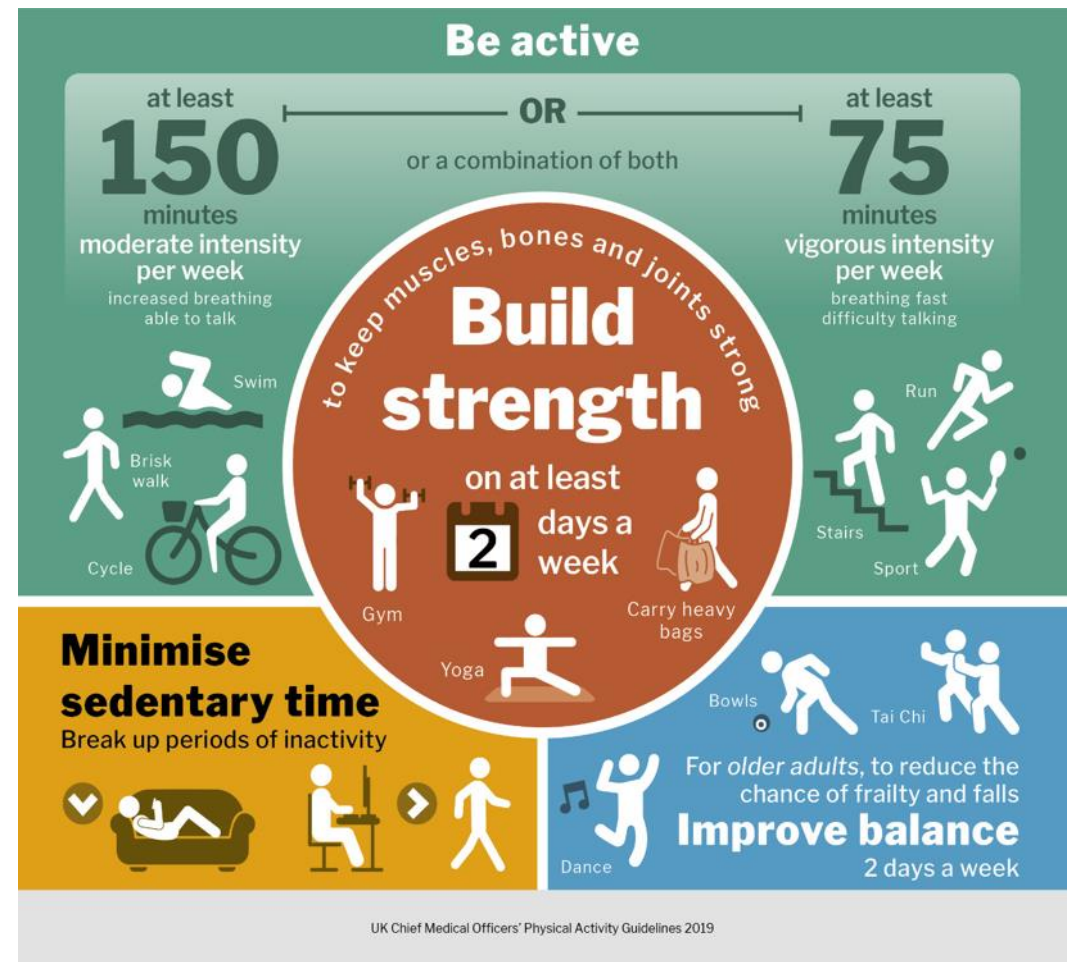
Promote MSK health in the workplace

Increase physical activity

Encourage and support employees to be active and avoid being sedentary for long periods of time. Warm ups and mini-breaks help.

Any activity is of benefit but, if you can, the more strenuous the better.

It improves your health and you also feel better.



Be active

at least **150** minutes moderate intensity per week
increased breathing able to talk

OR

at least **75** minutes vigorous intensity per week
breathing fast difficulty talking

or a combination of both

Build strength
to keep muscles, bones and joints strong

on at least **2** days a week

Minimise sedentary time
Break up periods of inactivity

Improve balance
For older adults, to reduce the chance of frailty and falls
2 days a week

UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines 2019

Step 5

Act early

- The sooner a MSK problem is managed, the less likely it is to become a long-term problem and less likely there will be long-term work loss.
- Often simple measures can be taken to enable the employee to continue to work (e.g. task rotation, reduced hours, support from colleague).
- Early access to professional support can be encouraged and enabled (e.g. access to physiotherapy)

This means enabling and encouraging employees to talk about as soon as it arises.



Step 6

Help people manage their own health

Helping employees to manage their own health problems, or 'self-management', is an important approach to be used in conjunction with any support provided by the employer or healthcare professionals.

Self-management behaviours develop over time and are a product of the experience of living with the condition.

You need to:



Know what support your employees need



Signpost employees to knowledge and support that will enable them to manage their conditions



Provide reasonable adjustment and adaptation



Provide individual support related to their specific problem which helps employees to work to their potential

Adjustments in the workplace

Most people with an MSK problem are able to continue in work, providing there is some allowance for their problem. Continuing in work within their abilities will not cause more damage or a worse health outcome in the long-term.

People with persistent and chronic MSK problems find ways to work around them at home and need that opportunity in the workplace.

Small changes can be effective in enabling people to work. Managers need to help them find and implement solutions.

As an employer, you are legally obliged to provide adjustments that are deemed necessary and feasible. You can get advice on reasonable adjustments from the Disability Employment Adviser (DEA) at [your local Jobcentre Plus office](#). Employees can apply for [Access to Work](#) if they need extra help.

An employees needs will become clearer through good communication. Their ability to find solutions can also be supported by advice that is available from the public and voluntary sectors.

In work support – Joint Pain Adviser

- Helping people manage their MSK problem both in the work place and at home
 - People do not always seek advice about their MSK problem until it is causing major limitations.
 - Improving access to advice and support can reduce the impact the MSK problem has on their lives
 - Joint Pain Adviser
 - People can self refer if they have back, hip or knee pains that is not improving and affecting their everyday lives.
 - Learn how to self manage their MSK problem, and when to seek further help
 - 4 sessions of 30 mins over 6 months
 - Delivered in the work place by trained non-medical health advisors
 - Been piloted in Cornwall and London
 - Outcomes - reduction in pain, increased physical activity, improved wellbeing
 - Now being delivered through Healthy Workplace Cornwall
-

Step 7

Support employees to stay in or return to work

Some MSK problems will be long-term or recurrent and then rehabilitation and a return to work programme is needed.

Management of MSK problems requires a joined-up approach that involves the **employee**, their **healthcare team**, and their **line manager** helping them to return to or stay at work.



Psychological barriers need to be recognised and worked around - frustration, anxiety and fear of the future. Stress can manifest itself as MSK pain. Dealing with an MSK problem may require support for their mental health.

The **Fit Note** is an important document to assist with overcoming these barriers and to ensure that you take the correct action.

Step 8

Train managers and employees to understand MSK health

- **Training** to enable employees to do their jobs in a safe and sustainable way, minimising risks to their health and how to look after their MSK health.
- **Managers need to**
 - be aware of and understand the importance of MSK health,
 - be aware of the risk factors for MSK problems,
 - know how to communicate with and support employees,
 - know what support is available if someone has a problem,
 - know their health and safety responsibilities and understand how to implement health and safety protocols and risk assessment tools.



Ensuring people are able to communicate

Training in communications

should aim to form a workforce that openly speaks about risk, their own health and listens to other workers.

A survey by Arthritis Research UK in 2016 found that people 'put up and shut up' when it comes to workplace health.

- > **A third of people (33%)** with a long-term condition felt their colleagues don't understand the impact of their condition.
- > **39%** don't feel confident discussing their workplace health with their employer.
- > **Over 1 in 7 (15%)** wouldn't disclose a long-term health condition such as arthritis to their employer.

Make sure your employees know and understand the communication process:

- > Who should they talk to?
- > What happens when a risk or specific MSK issue is reported?
- > Is there an opportunity to give feedback on any action that was taken?








This is particularly important for line managers and those in a position of responsibility for others:

- > Be approachable
- > Be clear about the support that can be offered
- > Stay in touch with employees on sick leave.

Develop a plan that considers prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation and return to work.

Look for quick wins and simple things to get the ball rolling:



-  A workplace risk assessment and a wellbeing survey can help identify MSK problems, providing some immediate feedback so you can start improving straight away.
-  Work with staff to develop your approach. Harness your workforce to deliver it together.
-  Encourage your senior leadership to become involved.
-  Encourage and support your health and safety lead. Engage and empower your employees to become wellbeing champions for MSK health
-  Work with others. Consider win-win partnerships with external resources and organisations. Link your wellbeing activities to national awareness days.
-  Encourage minibreaks during the working day
-  Signpost employees to sources of information and support.

Managing MSK health

Prevention, early intervention, and support

The ultimate goal is to provide a workplace that

- takes preventative action,
- encourages early intervention for any MSK problem and
- accommodates effective rehabilitation and return to work plans.



Resources



You can help employees by signposting the best support available for MSK problems provided by the NHS, Public Health England, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy and the voluntary sector.

The NHS has video exercise guides for different parts of the body, which can raise awareness of preventative behaviours, both in and out of work. Almost everyone has low back pain at some time so it is worth getting everyone engaged.

Be 'MSK Aware®'

Good musculoskeletal (MSK) health gives us mobility and is integral to a full and healthy working life. MSK problems such as back pain are amongst the commonest causes of work loss. MSK health and mental health are closely linked and both need to be considered. Employers can enable people to have full and productive working lives through promoting musculoskeletal health and preventing work loss due to musculoskeletal problems.

- ✓ **Recognise the importance of MSK problems and the risks within your workplace**
 - ✓ **The characteristics of the work:** physical and mental demands, shift patterns, variations in workload
 - ✓ **The characteristics of your workforce:** age spectrum, experience, gender, fitness, mixture of skills and expertise, staff shortages,
 - ✓ **The MSK problems of your workforce:** sickness records, staff surveys and appraisals
- ✓ **Open conversations**
 - ✓ **Have open conversations:** people suffer in silence for too long and then, when they do go off work, it is likely to be for a long time. Enable and encourage employees to talk about a MSK problem as soon as it arises so you can then act to help.
- ✓ **Reduce risks in the workplace**
 - ✓ **Match** the employee's capabilities and the demands of the job.
 - ✓ **Equip** employees with the necessary skills to cope with the demands of their job, through training and other support.
 - ✓ **Encourage** employees to place a high value on health and safety at work.
 - ✓ **Understand the law** for example, obligations relating to risk assessment and safety committee regulations.
- ✓ **Promote MSK health**
 - ✓ **Create a work environment that supports a healthy lifestyle** enabling regular physical activity, avoidance of being sedentary and supporting a healthy diet.
- ✓ **Act early**
 - ✓ **Act before a musculoskeletal problem becomes a longterm problem:** the sooner a MSK problem is managed, the less likely there will be long-term work loss. Often simple adjustments to their work and workplace can be taken to enable the employee to stay in work. Encourage and enable early access to professional support.
- ✓ **Help people manage their own health**
 - ✓ **Find out what help your employees need** and know where to signpost them for support that will enable them to manage their conditions whilst at work.
- ✓ **Support employees to stay or return to work**
 - ✓ **Management of MSK problems** needs good communication and a joined-up approach that involves the **employee**, their **healthcare team**, and their **employer and manager** enabling them to return or stay at work. Know how you can help.
- ✓ **Train managers and employees to understand MSK health**
 - ✓ **Training** to enable staff to do their jobs in a safe and sustainable way, minimising risks to their health.
 - ✓ **Managers need to be** aware of and understand the importance of MSK health, the risk factors for MSK problems,, know how to communicate with and support employees and know what support is available if someone has a problem. They must know their health and safety responsibilities and understand how to implement health and safety protocols and risk assessment tools.

Musculoskeletal health in the workplace:

a guide for employers

- Toolkit has been developed for employers.
- Content based on research evidence and on the experiences of what employers and employees, including those with musculoskeletal problems, have found to reduce the impact of such problems on work.
- Developed for PHE and the Arthritis & Musculoskeletal Alliance (ARMA) by Business in the Community, Forster Communications and the Bone and Joint Research Group, Royal Cornwall Hospital.
- Many experts, employers, employees and organisations have also contributed their knowledge.