

The Body and Mind Connection: how practicing wellness at work prevents musculoskeletal disorders

When you're tired, mentally stressed or feeling unsupported at work, your body feels it too. Tense muscles, poor posture and fatigue can all increase your risk of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). MSDs is a broad term used to identify common issues experienced by employees related to muscle discomfort, back pain, sprains or strains.

Making small changes in how you work, rest and feel on the job can make a big difference. While your safety at work is ultimately your employer's responsibility, there are steps you can take, such as the ones listed below, to own your personal safety and reduce your MSD risk. A strong safety culture starts at the top, but you can advocate for the conditions you need to stay safe.



Did you know that stress can cause you to unconsciously tighten your muscles and make you more prone to MSDs? The opposite is also true! Muscle and joint pain can lead to stress, poor sleep and less movement, making both your body and mind feel worse.

→ Small stress-relief habits in and outside of work can help your body stay loose. Take a moment to breathe deeply, check your posture or move your body – short walks, stretches or light exercises can improve posture, strengthen muscles and help protect you from musculoskeletal pain and injury. Regular physical activity also improves mood, boosts energy and enhances sleep.



Did you know that depression and anxiety can increase your perception of pain, making musculoskeletal symptoms feel more intense and disabling?

→ If you are experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety, talking with a trained professional can help alleviate your symptoms. Check if your employer has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or if your insurance offers mental health coverage.



Did you know that increased mental workload can lead to riskier or more awkward working postures, thereby increasing the chance of developing an MSD?

→ Take small, routine breaks to pause and reset your posture. When possible and safe to do so, step away from the workstation (perhaps to talk to a co-worker). This provides a break for the mind as well as the body.
→ Focus on one task at a time. A clear mind helps your body move safely.



Employers: Visit the National Safety Council [Workplace Wellbeing Hub](#) to learn more about building safe workplaces that are engines for health and wellness, and the [MSD Solutions Lab](#) resources page to learn more about MSD prevention.



Employers: Provide opportunities and reminders for employees to take breaks throughout the day. Consider instructor-led breaks to encourage movement and stretching.



Employers: Ensure that your company has an EAP and/or that insurance includes mental health coverage.



Employers: Schedule regular breaks and encourage employees to listen to their bodies and step away from the workstation when needed. Discourage working through breaks.



Did you know that employees with strong emotional and social support are less likely to develop MSDs, even when performing physically demanding tasks?

→ Help to create a positive work environment by supporting your co-workers and providing honest feedback on employee perceptions surveys so that management can be aware of concerns and risks.



Employers: Make sure there is a clear and simple process for employees to share questions and concerns related to their work or work environment. Promote this process and encourage honest feedback. Always follow up on employee feedback.



Did you know your body repairs itself during high-quality sleep? Poor sleep or getting less than seven to eight hours of sleep a night can reduce muscle recovery and increase your risk of developing an MSD.

→ Try to stick to a regular sleep schedule and create a relaxing, screen-free bedtime routine. If your job requires non-standard working hours (e.g., swing shift, graveyard shift), talk to your supervisor about strategies for working safely.



Did you know that smoking reduces blood flow to muscles and joints, which can lead to more pain, longer healing times and a higher risk of MSDs?

→ If you're thinking about cutting back or quitting, you're not just helping your lungs – you're protecting your back, shoulders and knees too.



Did you know that proper nutrition supports bone, muscle and joint function, thereby decreasing risk of MSDs? Diets low in nutrients and high in processed foods can contribute to inflammation, poor posture and slower recovery from MSDs.

→ Choose foods that fuel your body – like fruits, vegetables, lean proteins and whole grains. Even small swaps can support your strength and recovery.



Did you know that alcohol or substance misuse can slow reaction time, affect coordination and increase the chance of strain or accidents on the job? Additionally, employees with MSDs are at higher risk of long-term opioid use and opioid use disorder. Pain from MSDs, especially when untreated, can lead to more severe pain, increasing the risk of opioid dependence.

→ Stay sharp and safe by avoiding impairing substances before or during work and remember to check medication labels to understand any side effects.

→ Don't wait to report pain or discomfort to your healthcare provider or your employer. Early care and accommodation can help you recover faster and avoid more serious problems down the line. If you're dealing with ongoing pain, talk to a healthcare provider about options like physical therapy, gentle stretching or over-the-counter relief. Talk to your supervisor about alternative work arrangements.

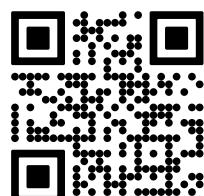
→ Get familiar with your organization's benefits. In some cases, treatment and accommodation support may be available.



Employers: Encourage and create processes for early reporting of pain and discomfort and provide accommodations for injured or recovering employees. Additionally, check that your company's insurance provides adequate treatment, including physical therapy and medication.

Consider adopting [recovery-supportive policies](#) to support employees struggling with substance use disorder while maintaining a safe environment.

Get more resources:



References:

- <https://www.nsc.org/faforms/msd-non-physical-risk-factors-whitepaper>
- <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2020-044453>
- <https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm9030702>
- <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11379-3>