



Confronting Repetitive Motion Injuries

Introduction

Repetitive motion injuries aren't limited to fingers, hands and arms – they often involve the upper back, neck, shoulders and elbows, too. When there is a repetitive motion injury, the pain may be isolated to one spot or it may migrate from place to place. It might be a burning pain, a sharp stabbing pain or a dull ache that doesn't go away.

The Basics of Repetitive Motion Injuries

If you bend a piece of wire back and forth, eventually it will break. Why? Metal fatigue causes the wire to wear down until it breaks. Our bodies are no different – when fatigued for extended periods of time, they eventually begin to break down, causing pain and sometimes ultimately lost time at work. If you are experiencing aches and pains, your body may be telling you something. Since repetitive motion injuries are invisible, small injuries can go unnoticed until a more serious soft-tissue injury occurs.

Reducing or Eliminating Repetitive Motion Injuries

To reduce or eliminate repetitive injuries, we have to take steps to prevent them in the first place. This starts with reducing the number of repetitive motion activities at work. Then, when they do occur, we must remember to give muscle groups a chance to rest. Does this mean taking more breaks? Not necessarily. It means that if you are doing one type of motion (say, wrist twisting when using a screwdriver) for a long period of time, switch to another job that doesn't use that same muscle group. To find a task that uses different muscle groups, you might rotate with a co-worker.

Another thing that reduces or eliminates repetitive motion injuries is maintaining good posture when sitting or standing. Poor body posture forces muscles, tendons and nerves into awkward positions and amplifies strains. Moreover, work at a comfortable speed. Even when your work is driven by machine functions or queue processes, you can pace yourself so the muscles you're using have a chance to rest.

Maintaining Flexibility

One of the biggest factors in reducing or eliminating repetitive motion injuries is maintaining flexibility. A contributing factor to strains is moving muscles in ways they aren't ready to move or using muscle groups that haven't been warmed up for work. For this reason, before we start work, we need to warm our muscles up. There is real value in practising some basic stretching exercises for our hands, wrists, back and neck to prepare our bodies for work. Hands and wrists should be stretched so they are ready to move in typical ways required at work. Your neck can be stretched gently from side to side and then from front to back, and your back can be stretched while sitting in a chair and bending so your chin comes close to your knees.



Lifting Techniques

How we lift and use our backs can determine whether or not we'll someday experience pain or back problems. Improper lifting causes problems and unnecessary pain.

First, when lifting, size up the load, and if it is too awkward, too big or too heavy, get some help. Many times, people lift items that are too big for them and cause themselves undue pain. This isn't about proving your strength – it's about being smart.

Second, always lift with your legs and never with your back. Your legs are your strongest muscles and are designed to lift heavier objects. Never bend at your waist when you are lifting heavier objects because you could potentially end up with low back pain or musculoskeletal disorders.

Finally, when lifting, avoid lifting and twisting in the same motion. Your first goal is to get what you are lifting to the right level. Once your legs are straight, move your legs to turn instead of twisting your back.

Simple Steps to Avoid Muscle Stress

Taking breaks at regular intervals gives you a chance to rest and stretch your muscles. If you are sitting, stand up and stretch. If you have been typing for a while, stop and stretch your hands and wrists. If you have been standing for long periods of time, sit down and stretch your back out again. If you can alter the work you do and use different muscle groups, change work after a period of time to give a muscle group a rest while using some others. Sometimes a little common sense can go a very long way in reducing pain.

Final Thoughts

If you have work station design issues that need reviewing, remember to bring this information to your supervisor's attention so action can be taken. is very interested in making sure that everyone is able to work without pain. If you have any questions regarding your work area, please let us know.



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