

CONSTRUCTION

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The Basics of Ergonomics

Introduction

Working through pain can be a serious problem in construction. If you continue to work when you're hurt, you are risking disabling injuries that could end your career. When you study the way you perform tasks on site, you can identify problems and correct them before getting hurt. This study is called ergonomics.

Results of Musculoskeletal Disorders

Musculoskeletal disorders can develop either suddenly or over time, causing debilitating pain and resulting in lost time and wages at work. The most common pains come from strains in the neck, lower back, shoulders, elbows, wrists, hands and eyes due to one or more of four primary risk factors: awkward postures, excessive force, repetitive motion or contact stress. **The way employees lift and move their bodies is a major contributing factor in various disorders.**

About Your Work Site

The way your work site is set up may determine your risk of developing a musculoskeletal disorder over time. Improper positioning on site can cause various disorders by causing you to reach or strain unnecessarily. If you are regularly bending or twisting to do regular tasks, your risk of developing a disorder is much higher. However, if you follow several basic guidelines, you can stay pain- and injury-free.

Warming Up Before Work

Moving the body in ways it is not ready to move and using muscle groups that haven't been warmed up for work can be a major cause of pain. **There is real value in practising basic stretching exercises for our hands, wrists, back and neck to prepare our bodies for work.** Begin with your hands and wrists, stretching them thoroughly for the movements typically made at work. Stretch your neck gently from side to side and then from front to back. Stretch your back while sitting in a chair by bending your chin towards your knees.

Lifting Methods

When lifting, first take a good look at the load. If it is too awkward, too big or too heavy, ask for help. On many occasions, workers lift items that are too big for them simply because they are unwilling to ask for help, resulting in unnecessary pain and lost wages. **Success at your job means getting assistance when necessary.**



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Second, **lift with your legs, never with your back.** Your legs are your biggest muscles and, unlike your back muscles, they are able to lift heavier objects. With a straight back, keep weights at shoulder level. Bending at your waist when you are lifting heavy objects can strain your back muscles, which can lead to pain and musculoskeletal disorders.

Third, **avoid lifting and twisting in the same motion.** Your first goal is to get the object off the ground. Once your legs are straight, you can move your legs instead of twisting your back.

One final thought on lifting: back belts do not allow you to lift more weight and may lead to additional problems if they cause you to ignore proper lifting principles. **The only way to effectively prevent back injury is to follow the correct lifting procedure, with or without a back belt.**

Breaks

Although there are many ways to avoid musculoskeletal disorders, repetitive motion injuries and other ergonomic-related problems, one of the best ways to prevent pain is to recognise that muscles require periodic rest.

As you work, take regular breaks to stretch and rest your muscles. If you are sitting, stand up and stretch. If you have been working on a detailed task, 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. Switch with a co-worker to change the type of task you work on after a period of time to give one set of muscle groups a rest while using others. A little common sense can go a long way in reducing your risk of pain and lost wages in the long term.

Get Involved

If you feel the way that your worksite is set up needs to be reviewed, remember to bring this information to your supervisor's attention. The company is very interested in making sure that everyone is able to work without pain. If you have any questions regarding ergonomics or your work area, speak up.



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