Prevent musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) in health care workplaces

Client handling and manual materials handling are two common activities in health care workplaces that can lead to musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs).

MSDs are injuries and disorders of the muscles, tendons, nerves and spinal discs, and so on. They can develop for many reasons, including ongoing exposure to repetitive work, forceful exertions (such as heaving, lifting and pushing), and awkward postures that can affect the bones, joints, ligaments and other soft tissues.

MSDs are the most common workplace injury; they cause more than 40 per cent of all lost-time injuries in Ontario, according to the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB). Employers are required to put in place controls to protect workers from hazards.

Preventing MSDs should be a key part of every workplace health and safety program. In safe and healthy workplaces, employers:

- identify and assess job-related MSD hazards
- put in place controls to reduce workers’ exposure to MSD hazards
- advise and train workers on MSD hazards in their jobs and workplaces
- encourage workers to participate in their workplace’s health and safety program by promptly reporting MSD symptoms or concerns to their employer/supervisor, and
- follow up to ensure preventative measures are working

The duties of workplace parties are set out in the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA) and Health Care and Residential Facilities (HCRF) Regulation. Duties to prevent MSDs include:

**Employers**

- provide information, instruction and supervision to workers for their health and safety
- ensure equipment is maintained in good condition
- acquaint workers – or persons in authority over workers – with any work-related hazards and in the handling, storage, use, disposal and transport of any article, device, equipment or a biological, chemical or physical agent
- take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of a worker (including protection from MSD hazards)
if the workplace is regulated by the Health Care and Residential Facilities Regulation:

- develop, establish, and put into effect written measures and procedures to control MSD hazards, in consultation with the workplace’s Joint Health and Safety Committee (JHSC) or health and safety representative (HSR)
- develop, establish and provide training and education programs on the measures and procedures, in consultation with the JHSC or HSR
- keep work surfaces free of obstructions, hazards, and cracks, holes and bumps that may endanger workers
- ensure machinery or equipment (including client handling devices) is inspected immediately before its use and at regular intervals, as recommended by the manufacturer, and is serviced and maintained in accordance with the manufacturer’s recommendations and instructions
- ensure that materials, articles or things are handled, stored and disposed of in a manner that will not cause a hazard and they are transported, placed or stored so they can be removed or withdrawn without endangering the safety of workers

Supervisors

- ensure any equipment required by the employer is used by workers
- advise workers of any potential or actual health and safety dangers known by the supervisor
- ensure workers know of any health and safety measures and procedures in place to protect them from MSD hazards
- take every precaution reasonable in the circumstance for the protection of a worker from MSD hazards in the workplace

Workers

- know the workplace’s health and safety measures and procedures
- report any known workplace hazards (including MSD hazards) or OHSA violations to the supervisor or employer
- use the equipment required by the employer

Workers should also be aware of their rights under the OHSA, such as the right to refuse unsafe work except in specified circumstances.

Protecting Workers

It is the responsibility of employers and supervisors to ensure all workplace parties comply with the OHSA and its regulations.

For more information on legal responsibilities please visit:
www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90o01_e.htm
More information

- Ministry of Labour: Musculoskeletal Disorders / Ergonomics:
  www.ontario.ca/MSD
- Public Services Health & Safety Association:
  http://pshsa.ca/
- Health & Safety Ontario:
  http://healthandsafetyontario.ca/HSO/Home.aspx
- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS), ergonomics:
  www.ccohs.ca/keytopics/ergonomics.html
- Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW):
  www.ohcow.on.ca/
- Workers Health & Safety Centre:
  www.whsc.on.ca/

Toll-free number

Call 1-877-202-0008 any time to report critical injuries, fatalities or work refusals. Call between 8:30 a.m. and 5 p.m., Monday to Friday for general inquiries about workplace health and safety. Always call 911 in an emergency.

Note: This document does not constitute legal advice. To determine your rights and obligations under the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA) and its regulations, please contact your legal counsel or refer to the legislation at www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90o01_e.htm.

While this fact sheet will also be available to Ministry of Labour inspectors, they will apply and enforce the OHSA and its regulations based on the facts as they may find them in the workplace. This fact sheet does not affect their enforcement discretion in any way.