
Workplace safety - overuse injuries

Summary

- Occupational overuse syndrome (OOS) is caused by repetitive movements or awkward postures.
 - Changes to workplace design and practices can reduce symptoms or prevent the condition.
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Occupational overuse syndrome (OOS) is a type of injury common to fingers, hands, wrists and elbows. It is caused by repetitive movements or awkward postures. OOS is also known as repetitive strain injury or RSI.

Symptoms include swelling, pain and weakness in the affected joints. Vulnerable tendons can be overworked and inflamed by repetitious manual tasks such as working on a keyboard, working on an assembly line or even playing a musical instrument.

Rest is usually the best cure. Sometimes poor workspace design or work practices contribute to OOS. Making minor changes can alleviate or prevent the condition.

Common symptoms of overuse injuries

Occupational overuse syndrome is usually associated with repetitive hand movements such as typing, but any part of the body can be affected. OOS can affect the tendons and muscles of the fingers, hands, wrists, elbows, shoulders, back and neck.

Symptoms vary, depending on the individual, the site of injury and the severity of the condition. Common symptoms may include:

- pain
- muscle weakness
- swelling
- numbness
- restricted mobility of the joint.

Progressive debilitation of overuse injuries

It is not possible to 'work through' OOS. Initially the pain and stiffness may be slight and only noticeable while the particular manual task is performed. If these symptoms are ignored the discomfort will escalate until the joints, muscles and tendons are painful even when at rest.

Overuse injuries – high-risk jobs

Any manual task that requires fast and repetitive movements or working in fixed or awkward postures for long periods of time can trigger OOS. Anyone who works with their hands, such as hairdressers, musicians and mail workers, can experience OOS.

Occupations at risk include:

- **office work** – such as typing and clerical duties
- **process work** – such as assembly line and packing
- **piece work** – such as sewing
- **manual work** – such as bricklaying and carpentry.

Risk factors in developing overuse injuries

Workplace design and work practices can contribute to OOS. Risk factors can include:

- furniture, tools or equipment that don't conform comfortably to the body
- benches or workstations that are too high, too low or too far from the body
- machinery that operates too quickly for user comfort, such as speedy conveyor belts that force the worker to move fast
- workspace design that requires repeated bending, stretching or twisting
- tight deadlines that prevent workers from taking sufficient breaks
- repetitive manual tasks.

Reducing the risk of overuse injuries

Making changes to the design of a workplace and workplace practices, and using adjustable furniture can reduce the risk of OOS.

Changes to workplace design

Suggestions include:

- Use ergonomically designed furniture and equipment.
- Rearrange the workspace to keep everything needed within easy reach.
- Keep benches at waist height, so that shoulders can relax and arms can bend gently at the elbows.

Changes to work practices

Suggestions include:

- Schedule work to include frequent breaks.
- Vary tasks so that repetitive hand movements are alternated with other work.
- Set realistic deadlines.

Adjusting furniture to suit your body

Keyboard operators and typists are commonly at risk of developing OOS. Furniture, such as chairs and desks, should be adjusted to suit the dimensions of the individual and support good posture.

Suggestions include:

- Adjust the height of your chair until your elbows are level with the keyboard.
- Use a chair with a lumbar (lower back) support.
- Keep document holders next to the computer screen, at the same viewing distance.
- Use a footstool to raise the level of your knees slightly higher than your hips, if you cannot make adjustments to your desk and chair.
- Locate the mouse close to the keyboard and use a mouse pad.
- When possible use regular-sized computers instead of smaller laptops.

Treatment options for overuse injuries

If you think you are developing OOS symptoms, tell your manager. In consultation with your occupational health and safety officer you can devise ways to change and improve work practices and workspace design.

See your doctor for treatment, advice and referral.

Where to get help

- Your manager or supervisor
- Your workplace occupational health and safety coordinator
- Your doctor
- Your union

- **WorkSafe Victoria** Tel. (03) 9641 1444 or 1800 136 089 (toll free)

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