

## >> Ergonomics: Risk Reduction Through Early Symptom Recognition

Overuse injuries, also called repetitive stress injuries (RSIs) or repetitive stress disorders (RSDs) are quite costly to businesses in all sectors. There are economic costs for medical care, lost time, lost productivity and administrative issues. There are also the “human costs” relating to lost wages and quality of life factors.

Because of the costly impact of RSIs – both to workers and employers – workplace safety programs often are developed to minimize their occurrence and severity. These programs often focus on environmental and ergonomic factors, awareness and education. Too often, education, in the form of early symptom recognition, is overlooked.

Many workers disregard sensations of discomfort and discount the potential impact the discomfort will have if left unchecked. There are many reasons employees may

Focus education and awareness on recognition of the early symptoms of repetitive stress disorders to reduce risk.

be quick to dismiss pain, or to delay bringing attention to these symptoms. Among them are:

- Stoicism about being in pain – “just grin and bear it”
- Concern of becoming a liability to the employer
- The association of pain with being “part of getting older”
- Belief that pain will eventually go away on its own
- Thinking that pain is just part of working hard – a principle especially common within the older work force.

Consequently, employees often will delay seeking solutions for symptoms until it’s too late. The result is that a relatively minor ache or pain develops into a costly RSI.

Therefore, any safety efforts put toward prevention of overuse injuries must have a focus on both awareness and education as they relate to early symptom recognition. Because pain is such a subjective experience, education on early symptom recognition needs to be:

**Joint specific** – The sensation of pain in one body area often will present itself differently than in does in another, so it’s important for employees to be able to recognize how, for example, neck and upper back pain will feel and manifest differently than pain at the elbow.

**Condition specific** – Employees ultimately need to

know which symptoms occur and where, anatomically, they occur with specific pain syndromes and conditions. Take for example lateral epicondylitis, or “tennis elbow;” it is critical for the employee to know which part of the elbow is affected so that correlation of early symptom recognition and condition identification can occur. When an employee recognizes specific symptoms occurring and has knowledge of what type of condition these symptoms may represent, the employee is more likely to seek solutions for them.

**Task-specific** – Identifying troublesome workstations and job tasks is a necessity. Once identified, the next step is to note the types of pain patterns and specific joints being affected by the troublesome job tasks. With this knowledge, there is far better ability to bring awareness to employees about which job tasks tend to contribute to specific symptoms in specific joints.

While the resources for generating “task-specific” education for early symptom recognition tend to sit within the facility itself, resources for developing joint-specific and condition-specific education may include company occupational medical and health staff or local health care professionals, i.e. sports medicine physicians, physical therapists, etc.

Finally, the roles of education and awareness in early symptom recognition work best when coupled with an effective first reporting system. In short, a good first reporting system is the mechanism by which employees pro-actively alert their supervisors, company medical staff, etc. when they recognize symptoms early on that are associated with performing certain job tasks. By this mechanism, solutions for both the employee’s symptoms and for the job task(s) that contributed to the onset of symptoms can be sought before the employee’s aches and pains develop into a costly RSI.

Remember, early symptom recognition is an integral piece in any risk reduction and overuse injury prevention strategy. **EHS**

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