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Overuse Injuries and Repetitive Strain Injuries

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What do the following people have in common: a musician practicing his instrument for several hours a day, a cashier scanning groceries, an assembly line worker performing a given arm motion over and over, a message therapist frequently applying pressure with a bent wrist and a materials handler lifting heavy boxes all day? They are all at risk for musculoskeletal stress in the form of overuse and repetitive strain injuries. Our bodies are made for movement, but they are not designed to withstand the repetition of a given motion over and over, all day long.

Repetitive strain injury will soon account for half of work related injuries. And women are hardest hit.

If you spend 75 percent of your work hours hunched over the keyboard and are used to feeling minor aching in your hands, its time to see your doctor. If left undiagnosed repetitive strain injury (RSI) can leave you unable to open jars, turn doorknobs or even brush your hair and teeth. It can cause permanent disability.

RSI which is often known as cumulative trauma disorders or occupational overuse injuries have been dubbed "the industrial disease for the information age" and are expected to make up fully half of the work-related injuries over the next decade.

The term repetitive strain injury encompasses a whole range of soft-tissue injuries usually involving joints that are weakest. Joints at highest risk are wrists, hands, backs, elbows, shoulders and necks. Specific injuries have different names, such as bursitis, tendonitis, synovitis or carpal tunnel syndrome. In the long term, RSIs involve damage to nerves, tendons, ligaments and the sheaths that cover these constraining connective tissues. As well as holding our muscles and skeletons together, these soft tissues make possible the flexibility in our joints. Damage the tissues and flexibility vanishes - along with strength. Severe carpal tunnel syndrome, for instance, means the patient can no longer hold a pencil or make a sandwich.

The key factor causing RSIs is motion that is repetitive, forceful and/or awkward, resulting in strain. Most workers are exposed to risk when they are forced to adapt themselves to a machine's pace and design. Their work environments make it necessary to sit or stand awkwardly, to reach and lift awkwardly or to repeat certain unnatural

motions over and over again all day long. But even people who work as sign-language interpreters, musicians and massage therapists can get RSIs unless they do special warm-up exercises (as suggested by an occupational therapist) to avoid additional damage.

RSIs occur most often in occupations in which women predominate, such as data entry, electronic assembly, hairdressing, meat packing and cashiering. You may also be at risk if, despite a proper work setup, your posture is poor - that is, if you sit or stand with slumped shoulders and a protruding chin.

Some workplaces hire specialists in ergonomics to help workers analyze the physical demands of their jobs and to perform their jobs more efficiently with less physical strain.

Early detection of RSIs is absolutely essential to prevent permanent injury. Be alert to small aches or tingling sensations that you might feel at work or ones that begin after work or late at night. They could soon develop into overnight pain and then progress to incessant discomfort. The time lapse between the onset of symptoms and permanent disability can be as little as three months. Don't push yourself to continue despite the pain or it may become a lifelong companion.

Medical treatment usually includes the use of pain relievers, ice, rest and physical therapy to increase the strength and flexibility of the injured area. Exercise should be used as treatment only when prescribed as part of a comprehensive rehabilitation program. Exercise can exacerbate the injury and delay healing if it places additional stress on already overstressed tissue. Be sure to follow the instructions of your health care providers. Once the injury is fully healed, an appropriate conditioning program that includes exercises for increasing strength and flexibility can help prevent repetitive strain injury in the future.

Most provinces now have legislation that requires workplaces to have health and safety committees or representatives, who are trained to assess RSI hazards and can respond to RSI complaints. Until government, workers and employer reach agreement on ways to prevent RSIs, it's up to you to protect yourself.

Ways your workplace can prevent RSIs:

- Have adjustable workstations
- Get an occupational therapist to teach those in high-risk jobs proper warm-up exercises
- Provide job rotation
- Allow employees to take period work breaks

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