

The crippling impact of musculoskeletal disorders in the workplace

Musculoskeletal conditions have been a grinding pain on workers across the UK for many years now. But with the publication of the Fit for Work Europe report by the Work Foundation, it seems that this common cause of ill health is posing a serious barrier to growing prosperity, not just in Britain but across Europe.

Over 44 million (one in six) members of the European Union (EU) workforce now have a long-standing health problem or disability that affects their ability to work¹. And musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) – conditions affecting bones, joints and connective tissue – account for a higher proportion of sickness absence from work than any other condition. In fact, over 40 million EU workers are affected by MSDs that are attributable to their work¹.

In the UK alone, MSDs are by far the most commonly reported cause of work-related ill-health, causing 9.5 million lost working days and costing the UK economy over £7 billion¹.

What can businesses do to tackle these problems?

Companies who provide their employees with access to private medical insurance can dramatically cut the length of time that their employees spend absent from work as a result of musculoskeletal disorders. Through CIGNA's private medical insurance, employees can gain access to the tests and subsequent treatment that they need to recover from or manage their condition as quickly as possible.

Here at CIGNA we've recently enhanced our medical member experience by introducing a new benefit which will allow members to self refer to Nuffield Health for physiotherapy. This means that members won't even have to wait for a GP referral before accessing the treatment they need.

Nuffield Health has identified the most suitable treatment for key musculoskeletal conditions based on extensive clinical research. What's more, with over 450 Nuffield Health physiotherapy facilities throughout the UK, members can access treatment without delay. So while your employees can be assured that they'll be getting the most suitable treatment for their condition, you as an employer can be safe in the knowledge that your costs are being controlled.

But remember – prevention is often better than cure...

Although the causes of many MSDs remain undiagnosed, there are also a large number of problems that are known to be work-related - and in many cases preventable.

Over 375,000 people in the UK suffer from symptoms of work-related upper limb disorders which can affect their tendons, muscles, joints, blood vessels and/or their nerves¹. But if the right approach is taken to health and safety in the workplace many of these cases could be avoided.

The Scottish Centre for Healthy Working Lives highlights six main ways to help prevent injuries to muscles, bones and joints in the workplace:

- **Reduce manual force:** Reduce the weight of items to be lifted or distance to be moved, and use levers or a team of operators wherever possible.
- **Tackle factors that influence work:** Act immediately on any signs or symptoms of injury. Encourage early reporting and provide health checks where necessary.
- **Improve the working environment:** Maintain a reasonable temperature, avoid placing workers near draughts and ensure the lighting is right for the job.
- **Use the right working position and station:** Ensure enough space is available to perform the required task. Make sure that workers have access to appropriate desks, adjustable chairs and tools to prevent awkward postures.
- **Reduce repetition:** Break up work with short breaks or rotate staff to minimise exposure to repetitive tasks.
- **Provide training:** Make sure your employees are trained in the correct techniques for carrying out their work and that they understand how to use tools and equipment correctly².

As an employer you need to be aware not only of the cost of absence to your organisation as a result of these injuries – you also have a duty of care to protect your employees from these injuries as much as is reasonably possible.

A key way of demonstrating your duty of care to the health and safety of your employees is by providing an absence management and occupational health service, such as that delivered by CIGNA. By doing this you can use CIGNA's nurse-led approach to safely manage your staff back into the workplace during periods of absence. You can also deliver various ergonomic assessments to your workforce through OH nurses, to allow identification and early intervention of potential risks to the health of your employees.

By taking heed of the key factors causing MSDs, making use of the available tools and resources, and providing your employees with the support they need, you'll have the power to buck the back breaking trend of MSD costs in the workplace.

References:

¹ Fit For Work? Musculoskeletal Disorders in the European Workforce, 2009

² www.healthyworkinglives.com