

Summary of the law on STRAIN INJURIES



Workers who suffer from pain and stiffness in any of their upper limbs because of something they do at work may be suffering from strain injury categorised as a work related upper limb disorder or as repetitive strain injury.

This booklet provides a basic outline of what to look out for and what to do to minimise the risk of developing a strain injury at work.

- SYMPTOMS OF STRAIN INJURIES
- CAUSES
- WHAT SHOULD EMPLOYERS DO?
- WHAT SHOULD WORKERS DO?
- TIME LIMITS



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Who does it affect?

Work related upper limb disorders (WRULD) or repetitive strain injuries (RSI) can affect just about anyone engaged in repetitive or forceful work, or work which involves awkward posture.

Workers at risk therefore include secretaries, computer operators, hairdressers, cleaning staff, machinists, assembly line workers, fruit pickers and anyone who uses hand-held power tools.

Which part of the body does it affect?

It can affect any part of the arm or hand including the fingers, as well as the shoulder and neck.



What are the symptoms?

The main symptom is pain, which usually occurs when the worker is engaged in the activity that causes it, but it can sometimes escalate to the point where the pain is constant.

Workers may also experience stiffness, tingling, numbness, heaviness, weakness, tightness and cramp. The symptoms may even feel as though they are “jumping around” from one place to another. They also tend to spread. For instance, the pain might start in the wrist, but spread into the upper arm, shoulder and neck within days or weeks.

Tiredness is also common if sleep is affected. Pain may come and go depending on what the person is doing and whether they are under stress (which exacerbates the condition).

Whatever the symptoms, they should not be ignored. The symptoms may be slight at first but they could be an indication that something is wrong.



What causes it?

Strain injuries categorised as WRULD or RSI can be caused by a number of different work tasks that involve repetitive or forceful activity or a job that requires little or no movement.

It can also be caused by poor posture and even stress.

The more a task is repeated, therefore, the greater the risk to the worker. The speed at which people do their job, however, is not the only concern. Someone who moves their arm at low speed (but repetitively) may be just as much at risk as someone doing small, quick movements.

Likewise, workers who have to hold something or maintain a certain posture which involves little or no movement may also be at risk of developing a strain injury. Computer work can cause this “static muscle loading” unless the worker takes regular breaks.

For instance, workers who tend to hold their hands and arms in a certain position when using their keyboard may be at risk. And if a worker’s back is not well supported, they can get static muscle activity there and in the muscles of the neck.

Workers who have to handle heavy objects or carry out fast movements are also likely to be at risk.



What should employers do?

Employers have a duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 to prevent cases of strain injuries from arising, or to do something to prevent existing cases from getting worse.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) advises employers to:

- Assess the risks in the workplace by looking at what workers do to see if it could cause them harm.
- Reduce the risk by changing the way they organise work, for instance by offering regular short breaks instead of one longer break or by redesigning the work station.
- Provide workers with information and training.
- Encourage workers to report any signs and symptoms early.
- Allow anyone returning to work to carry out light duties or work reduced hours to begin with.



What should workers do?

In order to minimise the risk of developing a strain injury such as WRULD or RSI (or making an existing condition worse), workers should try to:

- Avoid carrying out activities for long periods of time.
- Avoid working in cold temperatures or handling cold items.
- Avoid working in a dim light as this makes workers more likely to adopt an awkward position.
- Avoid activities which involve friction.
- Slow down the speed at which they work.

It may not be possible for an employer to prevent all cases of strain injuries, because different workers respond differently to the risks.

However, if someone develops a strain injury, they must ensure that they do what they can to prevent it from getting any worse.

The first and most important thing is to report any signs and symptoms to their employer as soon as they appear and seek medical help if appropriate. If the employer fails to take the necessary steps to safeguard the worker's health and safety, then they should contact the union safety representative.

Some of the strain injuries constitute prescribed industrial diseases and an injured person may be able to claim Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit (IIDB). They should contact their local Department for Work and Pensions office for the relevant form. An injured person does have to prove that their employer was legally at fault to be entitled to IIDB.



Time limits

It is generally best to make a claim as soon as possible. Witnesses may have difficulty recollecting relevant matters and documents can get lost over time. The law states that injured people should start court proceedings within three years of the date they first suspected or were told by a medical professional that their symptoms were work related. Although the courts have a discretion to extend the time limit, it is always better to start legal proceedings within the three year time limit.



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