Musculoskeletal disorders are now the No. 1 type of workplace injury claims.
A Fresh Approach to Ergonomics: Getting Ahead of Liability for Repetitive Stress Work Injuries

Musculoskeletal disorders are now the No. 1 type of workplace injury claims.

No, robots have not taken over the world yet. And we don’t have robot overlords. And even computers know their place for the time being.

So there are still many jobs in manufacturing, production, and construction that require hands on operation. And when these jobs cause real physical strain, it is the employer’s responsibility to mitigate that strain.

There are many different kinds of injuries. Many injuries are not from one incident, but instead from repeated motion over many days, weeks, months, or years. When the strain causes an injury, that’s where Workers’ Compensation insurance policies come into play. Claims for musculoskeletal disorders are a big slice of the injury claim pie, and it’s likely to stay that way due to the kinds of tasks that are involved.

Musculoskeletal disorders, including strain or pain from repetitive tasks, are the leading injury cause of days away from work.
manufacturing workers perform. But wouldn’t it be better to avoid these claims altogether?

Not all Workers’ Compensation carriers and plans are the same. Some now offer extensive preventive programs that try to avoid repetitive stress injuries by monitoring, analyzing, and even re-engineering the workplace. And some respond very differently when such an injury claim is filed. How your plan responds to an injury claim can be critical to your bottom line, and how your company responds can either reduce your future exposure and liability—or compound it.

It’s not going away by itself

Although there have been improvements in knowledge and application of ergonomic principles in manufacturing, the rate of MSD injuries is still very high. So it’s critical for employers to understand how design, training, and maintenance can promote good ergonomic practices and policies—and, consequently, prevent MSD injuries.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports 650,000 work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WRMSDs) occur annually, resulting in costs to employers of over $20 billion. These costs include Workers’ Compensation and medical expenses, the latter of which are increasing 2.5 times faster than benefit costs. In fact, $1 of every $3 of Workers’ Compensation costs are spent on occupational MSDs, and a typical claim costs $29,000 - $32,000 per year.

Compared to other injuries, MSDs offer the greatest opportunity to reduce incidents and costs with improved working conditions and better ergonomics. Amerisure Insurance Company, a carrier specializing in comprehensive insurance products designed to protect businesses as well as the health and safety of employees, backs up this observation with research. According to loss data collected from 2011-2014 by Amerisure, 40.5% of all Workers’ Compensation claims could have been positively affected in some way by improved ergonomics, which translates to 26.7% of the total cost of all claims.

Even though the rate of MSDs relative to other injuries has dropped slightly in recent years, they are still a substantial cause for business losses and profit losses—and a very preventable cause.

A more proactive approach

Business owners overwhelmed by choices often make easy or convenient choices. However, many might assume that Workers’ Compensation policies are all pretty much the same. It might be news to them that some insurance carriers include preventive programs and incentives that work to create a “culture” of safety, ergonomics, and wellness. Individual service platforms for carriers may include detailed investigations and assessments into injury claims, which then offer preventative programs to help avoid future claims.

So what are the most effective ways to reduce ergonomic issues and MSD claims in manufacturing? Thoughtful design of equipment and tools is certainly one way.

One might expect that safety and ergonomics would be designed into all new machinery, but that is not always the case. If the supplier didn’t make it better to begin with, then either ask for better equipment or train employees on how to limit strain when operating that equipment.
The goal is to avoid claims, get workers back, and create a culture of safety and ergonomics. The best Workers’ Compensation insurance programs often have the added benefit of improving morale and helping employees become more positive and productive.

And these are not just amorphous pie-in-the-sky goals. A formalized program for ergonomics in the workplace includes concrete steps such as:

• Initiating a systematic work review process that addresses ergonomic factors periodically.
• Performing a Job Safety Analysis on all tasks prior to commencing production.
• Addressing all ergonomic factors such as posture, weight of object, repetition, etc.
• Implementing an observational safety program after production starts to identify work habits and behaviors that may contribute to MSDs.
• Training management, supervisors, and line employees on the process and injury prevention.
• Instituting accountability programs for safety, where supervisors enforce safety as opposed to production.
• Incorporating ergonomics in the equipment purchasing process, whether through plant engineer review or manufacturer’s redesign.
• Formalizing return-to-work programs that include a case manager to monitor progress, consult with physicians, and recommend how to achieve better ergonomics avoid similar injuries.

Returning to a safer job

Every company should have a strong return-to-work program because the benefits well outweigh the costs. Employees and supervisors should be trained on what to expect after an injury and the process of returning to work—and returning to a safer work environment.

One way to break down how important these programs are is to look at both the “direct” costs of an injury as well as the “indirect” costs. The indirect costs are harder to quantify, so they often go overlooked or underappreciated.

When an injury happens, the direct costs usually include medical costs and indemnity insurance payments. But the indirect costs can include wages to injured employees, legal fees, training replacement employees, the production impact of damaged materials, the cleanup time that delays schedules, and, sometimes, an increase in insurance premiums.

A final indirect cost is the morale of the employee and the morale of the entire company. If you don’t have robust programs that create a culture of safety, many employees will feel “unprotected” or “on their own.” Comprehensive Workers’ Compensation programs prove that the company will stand behind its employees when they get hurt.

Building that morale comes from employee engagement, such as periodic feedback from employees on work conditions and concerns. This could be as simple as asking how they feel after one day, one week, one month—or after any period of time—performing a repetitive task.

Wellness programs are another way to engage employees in their own health. These programs have been proven to be one of the most cost-to-benefit investments a company can make. Ergonomics and avoiding MSDs is just one other aspect of wellness, so encouraging em-
ployees to offer suggestions concerning their own work environment adds to the culture of wellness, which can also lead to better productivity.

When an injury happens

There are critical decisions that employers make at the time of a claim that can reduce or compound their exposure to exposure and liability. It’s important to have a plan for how to respond, how to treat the employee, and how to remedy the situation to avoid future incidents. A complete return-to-work program, with retraining or with new practices and procedures is essential.

Of course, some policies will provide the minimum. They’ll pay the claims and you’ll never hear from them again. In this day and age, it’s the service you get behind a product that sets companies apart. The most comprehensive Workers’ Compensation policies will have a much more proactive approach, even when there isn’t a claim.

For Workers’ Compensation coverage, manufacturing companies should look for insurers or brokers with deep

Workers’ Compensation programs should have case managers with ergonomic experience that make recommendations after an MSD injury to plan a healthful return-to-work program and before the next MSD injury to monitor ongoing work environments and practices.

Five Training Categories

- **Purchasing and Design Personnel** – Design ergonomics into the process before production. Design an adjustable workstation for differing worker characteristics. Make available the proper tools to reduce improper postures and grips. Suspend heavy tools above the workstation, and make them adjustable for postures and grips. Place raw materials in bins to allow for easy access and grip, and have a systematic way to place finished products, automated if possible.

- **Human Resources** – Teach human resources how to communicate differing individual ability considerations to supervisors. Are allowances available for a person who develops a disability? Are human resources personnel (or safety or management) trained to perform an ergonomic analysis?

- **Supervisors** – Train supervisors to perform ergonomic analysis. Do they know what constitutes an at-risk posture? Do supervisors know how to incorporate changes due to differing abilities to perform the task? Are they aware of return-to-work procedures and enforcement of light duty restrictions?

- **Employees** – Train employees in the basics of ergonomics: how poor posture can cause certain injuries; how some easy tasks can cause problems if they are repetition-heavy; how extra tools, lifts, or automation can help them with their jobs; why return-to-work training is important to them and their co-workers; how light duty restrictions should never be violated; and why an employee should never pressure others to violate their restrictions.

- **Health and Wellness** – Institute Health and Wellness Programs as part of ergonomics programs. These might include stretching, specific body movements, general warm-ups, as well as healthy nutrition and lifestyle recommendations.
experience in manufacturing. Experience that is focused in manufacturing means that your insurance company partners will be able to provide valued added service in not only safety and loss control but also with rehabilitation of an employee once a claim occurs.

The first two things that should happen when a claim comes in are 1) initiating an investigation into the causes of the claim and 2) laying out a plan for recovery and a timely return-to-work. After the investigation, there will likely be tool or equipment improvements, redesigning a work task, retraining the employee, and implementing a new operation as standard procedure.

With ergonomic injuries from repetitive tasks, there is often a vicious—yet wholly avoidable—cycle. The employee gets treated by an outside physician, they are released back to work, and they come back to a situation that causes the same injury again—or makes it even worse.

A Workers’ Compensation policy with preventive and prescriptive layers will perform a Root Cause Analysis of an MSD to identify the causes. An effective case manager at the insurance company will be able to work with the employer’s primary claims contact to lay out an entire return-to-work plan that is customized to the circumstances and seriousness of the injury. The case manager will also prepare the employee for his or her return, assign or restrict work activities, and recommend equipment or operational changes to the tasks that caused the injury.

If your insurance company does not have a case manager working with your management staff and following the progress of the injured employee, these common mistakes will likely occur:

- Not following operating restrictions, which can cause more problems
- Not working closely with the treating physician; they should know the work requirements plus possible solutions or workarounds
- Not training supervisors on the importance of employee return-to-work, which degrades the employer/employee relationship
- Not briefing coworkers on what is being done and why, which can also affect morale

Responsibility and accountability

The fact is employers have a responsibility to the health and well-being of their employees on the job. And accountability is one way to make responsibility the order of the day.

Sometimes it seems that the words responsibility and accountability are used interchangeably in safety and health. However, these two words have very different meanings. When applying these two concepts to management in the workplace, they take on very important and distinct differences in import and application.

Responsibility may be thought of as simply the “obligation to fulfill a task.” To be responsible, you need only be assigned one or more duties.

Accountability may be thought of as establishing the “obligation to fulfill a task to standard or else.” When you are held accountable, your performance is measured against some specific criteria or standard and consequences are applied appropriate to the level or quality of performance.

Supervisors are consistently measured on operational goals such as production, quality, and cost of their products. The critical component of a successful safety program is the ability to measure the supervisor’s safety

UNSOLVED PROBLEM SERIES #3

A Fresh Approach to Ergonomics

Seven Steps to a Better Ergonomics

1. Start during the design and purchasing process. Review manufacturing processes and discuss tooling and equipment with purchasing.
2. Design ergonomics into the process. Ensure the machines and processes are fitted to the workers, and allow for variability of personal characteristics.
3. Perform a Job Safety Analysis on all tasks prior to commencing production. Address all ergonomic factors (posture, weight of object, repetition, etc.).
4. Train management, supervisors, and line employees on the process. Ensure employees understand exposures, and train supervisors to stress safety over production.
5. Implement an observational safety program after production starts to identify work habits and behaviors that may contribute to MSDs.
6. Elicit regular feedback from employees on work conditions and concerns. Ask them how they feel after one day, one week, and month performing a specific task.
7. Manage all injuries carefully. Investigate the injury and learn from it. This includes Root Cause Analysis of all MSDs, and emphasize the importance of employee return-to-work.

A safe home away from home

Workplace injuries are unfortunate, but not inevitable. Do you really know what your claims adjusters will do when an injury happens? Make sure your claims are reported timely and your claims adjusters have detailed information and follow-up strategies. And make sure loss control representatives are available to make the necessary changes to the work environment.

The right Workers’ Compensation carrier and program can become your advocate in a number of situations. For instance, it’s easy for manufacturers to take shortcuts when designing machinery. Having an advocate demand more ergonomic equipment can aid in negotiating for the best machinery for the job—and the best machinery to avoid repetitive stress injuries.

Once a machine is in-house and up and running, routine Job Safety Analysis visits will reduce a company’s exposure to injuries, claims, and lawsuits. The results of that analysis might include regular training to keep safety and wellness top of mind. You schedule regular maintenance on all your equipment. Why wouldn’t you schedule regular maintenance on your employees to make sure they are running at optimal efficiency as well—and maintaining a culture of wellness?
Who is AHT?

AHT Insurance are insurance brokers and consultants with uniquely strong insights into the manufacturing industry with a high degree of specialization in product safety and product liability. The company has consulted on liability insurance policies from every angle for mid-to large-sized U.S. manufacturing companies. AHT offers consulting services on the ergonomic and job safety issues discussed in this brief with both existing and prospective long-term clients.

What Can AHT Do for Your Company?

We will take you through step-by-step review processes that lead to the most cost-effective insurance solutions and the most prudent and comprehensive strategies. We provide our clients with balance sheet protection by providing thorough proprietary processes utilizing risk assessment methodologies and documentation.

We also ensure that this commitment to best-in-class safety is properly represented to those underwriters involved in developing premiums. Our credibility in the underwriting community was built over many years of engaging sound and profitable accounts using our unique processes. We bring that commitment back full circle for manufacturers eager to promote personal safety and mitigate financial risk.

Who is Amerisure?

Amerisure is an insurance organization charged with creating exceptional value for its Partners for Success® agencies, employees and policyholders.

As a property and casualty insurance company, Amerisure’s promise to our partner agencies and policyholders begins with a comprehensive line of insurance products designed to protect businesses, as well as the health and safety of every employee. The Company is an A.M. Best “A” (excellent) rated company and services mid-sized commercial enterprises focused in construction, manufacturing and healthcare.