

# Absence Management

## How to 6: Support employees with musculoskeletal disorders

Advice for line managers

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### Introduction

This guide helps you to support employees with musculoskeletal disorders. It provides advice and practical support which can help employees remain at or return to work.

Musculoskeletal disorders affect the body's muscles, joints, tendons, ligaments and nerves. They are very common and are one of the main causes of sickness absence.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) website has some useful information about different types of musculoskeletal disorders. (<http://www.hse.gov.uk>)

### Managing musculoskeletal disorders

There is growing evidence which suggests that employees do not need to be 100% fit to be at or return to work. In many cases, an ongoing focus on work can help with recovery.

Living with pain can be debilitating and affect the employee's overall well-being. The NHS Choices website has some helpful information on living with pain. (<http://www.nhs.uk>) In some cases, ongoing pain can lead to depression. (<http://www.nice.org.uk>)

If an employee experiences a musculoskeletal disorder, it is important to take early action in order to alleviate symptoms in the workplace. The aim is to help the employee to continue to attend work while they recover or support them back to work.

Talk to the employee about how they are managing the condition out of work – if it works at home it should work in the workplace. Discuss whether these coping techniques could be imported into the workplace.

## **Back pain**

Back pain is one of the most common reasons for sickness absence amongst employees.

It is therefore important to work with the employee to find ways of managing back pain in the workplace. The Back Care Charity's website has useful advice on managing back pain at work. (<http://www.backcare.org.uk>)

There is a link between stress and back pain – stress can increase the risk of developing back pain. You should talk to the employee about whether stress is a factor and if so, take steps to address this where possible.

## **Things to consider**

In exploring ways to support employees with musculoskeletal disorders, consider the following:

- talk to the employee to find out how the condition is affecting them at work.
- organise a Display Screen Equipment workstation risk assessment to eliminate workplace factors which may exacerbate the condition. The assessment may identify the need to make changes to the workstation or for new equipment to help alleviate symptoms
- seek Occupational Health advice on how the condition is likely to affect the employee's ability to attend work and/or do their job. Occupational Health can help to identify any temporary workplace adaptations which may help the employee to remain at or return to work. They can also advise whether the condition is likely to amount to a disability and make suggestions about reasonable adjustments
- consider whether any temporary workplace adaptations or reasonable adjustments for employees with a disability would help the employee to carry out their role or return to work. Take into account any advice given by the GP on a 'Fit Note' which may help the employee return to work
- adopt a work-focussed approach early in a sickness absence to discuss how you can help the employee to return to work as soon as they are able

- be aware that some types of medication can have side effects. Consider whether any temporary workplace adaptations or reasonable adjustments are needed to help employees to carry out their role or return to work
- if the employee has been absent, think about the best time to talk to the employee about planning for a return to work.