

HEALTH AND SAFETY FACT SHEET

REPETITIVE STRAIN INJURIES



What are repetitive strain injuries (RSIs)?

Repetitive strain injuries (RSIs) are injuries that happen when you do the same motion over and over, causing stress to your body. These injuries usually affect parts of your body like muscles, nerves and tendons. Common places for RSIs are your wrists, elbows, neck and shoulders. They can cause pain, stiffness, numbness or weakness in these areas. RSIs are often seen in people who type a lot, use tools repeatedly or do other jobs that require the same movements many times.

Who is affected?

Once common in sports, RSIs now increasingly affect workers across many fields, from office clerks to manual labourers. These often overlooked injuries can lead to serious, sometimes permanent damage if not addressed early.

Causes

There are several types of repetitive strain injuries:

- Rapid movement injuries, caused by repeated rapid movement
- Forceful movement injuries, caused by strong muscle exertion
- Static injuries, caused by maintaining fixed positions without support.

RSIs are often caused by the way we work. For instance, a maintenance worker might experience pain from using force repetitively and working in awkward positions, while an office worker might develop RSIs from using a non-ergonomic keyboard and sitting without proper wrist support.

The design of tools and workstations often cater to an “average” build and may not accommodate all body types. This can cause us to work in ways that are not natural and put extra strain on our bodies, leading to serious injuries in our muscles and bones.

Other things that can lead to RSIs are working too much or too quickly, doing the same job all the time, using old or broken equipment, feeling stressed, working extra hours, not having enough training and vibration from tools or machines.

Symptoms

Symptoms vary from discomfort to severe pain and include numbness, tingling, swelling, muscle weakness and pain that may worsen at night. Early reporting of these symptoms is crucial for prevention and treatment.

Compounding injuries

Workers with an RSI in one body part might also get injuries in other areas. For example, if they have pain in their wrists or hands from their work, they might change how they move to avoid the pain. This can lead to new injuries in their forearms and shoulders.

Another issue is that workers often try to ignore the pain and keep working. They might not realize their pain is caused by their job. This can make the injury worse and lead to more serious problems.

Other concerns

Having an RSI is serious, and the pain can last a long time. But because it's hard to see the injury, people might not believe the worker is really hurt. Even though the pain might go away when the worker rests, it often comes back when they return to work. This can make it seem like the worker is complaining for no reason. Sometimes, other workers may think the job isn't that hard and the injured worker must be imagining the pain.

Some physicians have suggested that women are more prone to RSIs. It's more likely that women receive these injuries because they more commonly work in roles with repetitive tasks (like typing or cleaning). Also, the tools in these jobs are often designed for the average man's hand size, not considering the smaller grip size of many women, which can lead to more injuries.

How can we prevent RSIs?

To prevent RSIs, we need a comprehensive prevention program that includes:

- Education about RSIs: Workers need to learn what causes these injuries and how to spot the signs and symptoms early.
- A system for reporting early symptoms: Workers should report pain right away and not just try to deal with it.
- Time off for rest: If workers can stop the repetitive motion that's causing the injury, they can start to heal. But they shouldn't go back to work too soon, or the injury might get worse.

- Job changes: This can include doing different tasks, taking more breaks or changing how the job is done to avoid repetitive motions.
- Checking and fixing work areas: Look at how work is done and change tools or workstations to fit the workers better.

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