

Musculoskeletal health – March 2020

5-year strategic framework for prevention across the life course

The NHS has recognised that with an ageing workforce and population, special consideration needs to be made for helping people manage musculoskeletal (MSK) issues and maintain maximum function including employment.

MSK issues are the second largest cause of sickness absence for both men and woman living and working in the UK. MSK issues have multi-faceted effect on the individual:

- Pain, loss of mobility and dexterity and limitation activity
- Loss of confidence
- Loss of work
- Social and work life balance affected
- Mental illness has an impact on a person's ability to deal with an MSK problem

Poorly managed MSK issues have multi-faceted effect on the employer:

- Sick pay
- Lost productivity
- Loss of key skills
- Retaining costs
- Legal costs and injury benefits

In response to this the NHS has developed a 5-year strategic framework for prevention across the life course. The document recognises the important part different stakeholders play in preventing and managing MSK issues, including employers.

The 5-year Plan Vision: Help maintain and improve the musculoskeletal health of the population in England (across the life-course), supporting people to live with good lifelong MSK health and freedom from pain and disability (e.g. prevention).

Premise: Achieving the goal(s) below will help to achieve the vision, for example, by encouraging behaviour change among the population and System Leaders of England (including employers).

[5 year prevention strategic framework](#)

The UK has an aging population which is set to increase in coming decades. By 2040 more than half of us will be over 65. We also expect the working age range to be increased.

[HSE, Versus Arthritis](#)

Being in good employment is protective of health. Conversely, unemployment contributes to poor health.

[Marmot review 2010](#)

The suggestions from the NHS 5-year strategic framework for prevention across the life course is that there are 3 KEY FOCI for managing MSK and work:

1. Prevention of harm – see HSE site for many tools

- Employers need to identify risk and manage risk.
- Employers need to hire the right people for the job.
- Employers need to teach people how to manage their work safely.
- Employers must MONITOR AND REVIEW REGULARLY MSK risks (including monitor mental health of their staff, given the link between MSK and mental health)
- Employers must provide good line management for their staff given the critical nature of this role for staff job satisfaction, morale, understanding of organization focus and connectivity into their workplace.

MSK risks that employers are advised to have staff avoid:

- Lifting heavy loads
- Pushing and pulling
- Strange posture
- Frequent and repetitive activity
- Exposure to whole body vibration
- Stress inducing workplace factors, which can cause MSK type problems. These could include working in isolation, work at high pace, limited support, or limited control and feedback for the worker.

There is significant guidance in place from the HSE and minimum effort by an employer should involve regular assessment of workplace risks and monitor mitigating tactics and performance.

See HSE site for specific tools

- [Manual handling at work](#)
- [Upper limb disorder in the workplace](#)
- [Risk assessment of pushing and pulling](#)
- [Ergonomics and human factors at work](#)

2. Accommodation of need of people with MSK problems

The reality is that the work force is comprised of lots of different people with MSK issues of various age ranges. We are not just considering older workers and must consider all staff in creating ways to accommodate MSK issues.

Given that work can cause or exacerbate MSK issues the employer has an obligation to create a culture of open discussion, acceptance of diversity and ways to ensure they can HELP ACCOMMODATE FOR PEOPLE WITH MSK.

There are numerous inexpensive accommodations that an employer can offer such as flexible hours, work from home, workstation adjustments, task rotation, support from colleagues or managers, change of travel time, time off for medical appointments.

Some studies have suggested that for every £1 an employer spends on the wellbeing of their staff they gain £5 back in loyalty and low turnover.

Employers are encouraged to use the Government funded Access to Work Scheme that provides some extra funding for support for employees who are disabled or have a physical or mental health condition that makes it hard for them to do their job.

Resources:

- [Access to Work Scheme](#)
- [Employee Engagement A review of current thinking by Institute for Employment Studies](#)
- [Equality Act](#)
- [Guide/interpretation of reasonable accommodation/ adjustments by Council for Work and Health](#)

3. Promotion of health and well-being including for MSK – aspiration for employers

The reality is that PHYSICAL EXERCISE IS GOOD FOR EVERYONE.

It makes sense that an employer promotes exercise and activity for their employees.

Physical activity has a positive effect on cardiovascular disease, prevention of type 2 diabetes, colon cancer, depression, general mortality rate and much more.

Blue chip companies understand the importance of investing in their staffs physical and mental wellbeing.

[Consultancy.UK](#)

Why don't the majority of employers better promote physical activity in the workplace?

We need senior leaders to take this on board. We need employers to train and support their line managers to support staff and build good team climate and HELP INCREASE job satisfaction and build good working cultures.

Simple tactical ideas for promoting good physical health: walking meetings, place printer's long way from desks, encourage people to take lunch breaks and leave desk, turn off email day and talk and walk with colleagues, pedometer challenges etc.

The employer needs to promote good MSK health in the workplace and be supported by Government, NHS, charities etc. to make this happen.

[Tool kit for employers](#) Note the tool kit highlights that the primary focus of employers should be on prevention, then on management of MSK injuries or issues.

[Musculoskeletal health in the workplace](#)

Suggested action:

Inspiration for this article taken from NHS England webinars and a suggestion to sign up to the Public Health England knowledge hub [interest group](#) with lots of updates and information about MSK and evidenced based practice including injury management, prevention and managing work.

[Musculoskeletal Health Knowledge Hub](#)

About Vocational Rehabilitation

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is any process that enables people with functional, physical, psychological, developmental, cognitive or emotional impairments to overcome obstacles to accessing, maintaining or returning to employment or other occupation.

About the VRA

The VRA is a multi-disciplinary UK-wide charity supporting and promoting all those working in vocational rehabilitation and commissioning services whether in the public, private, voluntary or third sector.

We are keen to support and encourage employers, commissioning services, human resources and occupational health professionals to be more aware of, better understand the value of and engage in providing vocational rehabilitation.

We run events and free webinars as well as providing resources such as this factsheet and the Standards, Code of Practice and Scope of Practice for Vocational Rehabilitation Practitioners. Find out more on our [website](#), sign up for our [mailing list](#), become a [member](#) and follow us on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#).