

Important Facts About...

Musculoskeletal Disorders

What Every UFCW Meat, Poultry, & Food Processing Worker Should Know...

IS YOUR JOB HURTING YOU?

Workers in poultry plants can make as many as 15,000 cuts every day at line speeds that can go up to 105 birds a minute.

Meatpacking workers can make up to 20,000 cuts every day. They often work too close together, using knives or saws at dangerously fast line speeds.

These jobs are hard on the body, because workers do the same stressful motions over and over again.

The repetitious work can result in disorders like carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis and shoulder injuries – painful, often disabling diseases suffered by meatpacking, food processing and poultry workers. These disorders are called Musculoskeletal Disorders.



What are Musculoskeletal Disorders?

Musculoskeletal Disorders or MSDs, is the name for a group of disorders that hurt the tendons, muscles and nerves inside your hands, wrists, arms, shoulders, neck and back.

Poorly designed jobs can cause workers to get MSDs. These jobs make workers bend, twist and reach in awkward and dangerous positions over and over during their shift.

These motions put stress on muscles, tendons and nerves.

Over time, tissues can get damaged, making it hard for you to work or do things around your house. This kind of damage can leave you disabled for life.

There are many different kinds of Musculoskeletal Disorders. A list of these disorders is on pages 6 and 7.

What Causes Musculoskeletal Disorders?

Workers get Musculoskeletal Disorders when their jobs require them to work in ways that hurt their bodies. The problems in your job or work station that can cause MSDs are called risk factors.

Most jobs in food processing, meatpacking and poultry plants have more than one risk factor that can cause MSDs.

Risk Factors that Cause MSDs at Work Include:

- 1. Repetition:** Most line jobs require workers to make the same motions thousands of times a day. The constant repetition doesn't let your body rest.
- 2. Awkward or Stressful Body Postures:** You have to reach, pull, push or twist your body to do your job.

These are stressful body postures:

- Reaching over your head or behind you
- Stooping over or bending to the side
- Holding your arms out straight or elbows up and away from your body
- Bending or twisting your wrists
- Using a pinch grip

- 3. Using a Lot of Force With Your Arms or Hands:** Your work takes a lot of strength to get the job done, making the work harder to do.

The forcefulness of a job is increased when the job requires:

- Holding a tool in a pinch grip
- Using a dull knife or scissors

- Packing boxes with heavy cuts of meat
- Holding the nozzle of a high-pressure water hose

4. Heavy/Frequent Lifting

5. Other Risk Factors Include:

- Using vibrating tools, like a whizard knife
- Working in a cold workplace
- Hard-to-hold tools
- Bad grips on tool handles or boxes

These risk factors are very common in food processing, meatpacking and poultry plants.

What Are the Early Signs of these Disorders?

Pain

Soreness

Numbness

Tingling

Popping or cracking noises in joints

Redness

Burning feelings

Swelling

Stiffness

Weakness or clumsiness

What Should I Do if I Think I Have a Musculoskeletal Disorder?

Don't wait to see what happens!

If you feel pain that won't go away, make sure you get the medical treatment you need.

Your company should make sure that all workers get proper treatment for MSDs when they first feel symptoms.

Without early treatment, these disorders will get worse if you keep going back to the job that has caused the problem.

All Workers Should Know Four Things About These Disorders.

1. Get Treatment Early.

If you feel pain that doesn't go away, you should see a health care provider (a nurse or doctor). A rule of thumb for first symptoms is that if they have lasted a week, you should seek help. Of course, the more serious the pain, the sooner it should be checked out.

Don't wait! Your pain will keep getting worse if you don't get the medical treatment you need.

2. Get a Proper Exam to Diagnose a MSD.

A nurse or doctor should have special training in workers' health problems. Your health care provider should look, touch, and gently move the area where you are hurting. Only with this three-part examination can a nurse or doctor figure out how bad the problem is. Just looking at a worker's hand or wrist is not enough!

The nurse or doctor may give you medical treatment that includes:

- Medicine like ibuprofen
- Ice or ice massage
- A splint to wear at night
- Physical therapy
- Hydrocortisone treatments

- Some change in the job that you do so your body has a chance to heal.

Warning!

Surgery is serious. It should be a last resort treatment. Permanent disability can result even with surgery, and the condition often returns if the worker goes back to the same job.

Let your union know if you have problems getting to see the nurse or doctor in your plant. Companies may not discriminate against workers for reporting such problems.

3. The Company Should Provide Follow Up Care.

The nurse or doctor should check back with you every few days to see if you are getting better. The treatment should be changed if it is not working. If your condition is serious — or does not respond to treatment — the company should refer you to a doctor or specialist right away. If a nurse or doctor has put you on restrictions, the company must follow these — or the problem will get worse.

Remember!

If workers with musculoskeletal disorders are treated early, they often can get relief.

4. A Note On Exercise, Hot Wax Treatments and Splints:

Exercise programs can be a nice break, but they don't prevent workers from getting MSDs. Some exercises may even be harmful for workers with MSD symptoms.

Hot wax treatments feel good, but using heat may make MSDs worse.

Wearing a splint at work can make you struggle against the splint. This is not recommended.

Ways the Company Should Treat Workers with MSD Symptoms

- Allow workers easy access to a nurse or doctor.
- Make sure that nurses and doctors know how to assess the workers' problems.
- Give conservative medical treatment that follows a strict plan.
- Allow workers to follow all work restrictions given by the nurse or doctor.
- Provide good follow-up until the worker's condition has resolved.

Preventing These Disorders: Job Redesign and Ergonomics

Many workers suffer from musculoskeletal disorders. But they don't have to suffer!

The only way to prevent workers from getting MSDs is to fix the job that causes them in the first place. Jobs can be changed so workers can do them without getting hurt. Companies can reduce or get rid of stressful/awkward positions, high force and repetitious jobs. This is called ergonomics.

A good ergonomics program makes changes so that the job fits the worker, instead of making the worker fit the job.

The first step your company must take to prevent these disorders is to select the high-risk jobs and analyze them to determine the risk factors. Because workers know their job better than anyone else, workers must be involved in figuring out problems on a job as well as in planning job changes. Worker input — as well as the input of a joint union-management ergonomics committee — is very important to assuring the success of an ergonomics program.





How Can My Plant Use Ergonomics to Make Jobs Safer for Workers?

Many plants have made changes for their workers.

1. Your Plant Can Change Work Stations and Tools by:

- Using machines that can do some of the harder jobs, like pulling chicken skin from breast meat
- Giving workers adjustable stands
- Designing and using tools that don't make workers bend their wrists
- Lowering the height of the line/conveyor, so workers don't have to reach over their heads
- Using equipment that allows workers to perform the jobs in a neutral posture, such as scissor lifts for palletizing
- Providing tools that help workers to separate bone from meat (such as hydraulic and/or mechanical assists)

2. Your Plant Can Make Changes in the Way Workers Do Their Jobs By:

- Putting more people on a job (crewing up)
- Giving workers extra "mini" rest breaks from the constant work they do
- Giving new or reassigned workers a "breaking in time" so they can become "proficient" on the job (master the job) before having to "pull count"
- Giving workers sharp knives or scissors that make it easier to cut

3. Your Plant Should Also Provide Training that Includes:

- Training all workers and supervisors about MSDs and their early symptoms, as well as job risk factors
- Training workers how to do their jobs (including how to sharpen a knife, etc.), through a buddy system and the use of full-time trainers

Types of Musculoskeletal Disorders

Name of Musculoskeletal Disorder	What Happens Inside the Body	Signs or Symptoms Workers Should Know About
Tendonitis	The tendons in the hand and/or wrist become inflamed and irritated. Caused by repeated and/or forceful motions of the hand/wrist.	Pain, swelling, tenderness, redness, reduced hand grasp. If not treated, the tendon may be permanently weakened.
Tenosynovitis	The sheath (casing) around the tendon gets swollen and painful from repetitive, stressful motions of the hand/wrist. The inflamed casing can fill-up with fluid, sometimes causing a lump under the skin, often at the wrist on top of the hand. This is called a ganglion cyst.	Aching, tenderness, or swelling.
DeQuervain's Disease	The tendons on the side of the wrist and at the base of the thumb become irritated. Caused by forceful gripping, twisting of the wrist or movement of thumb back and away from the hand.	Pain, swelling, and discomfort when moving the thumb.
Trigger Finger	The tendon on one end of a finger gets swollen.	The finger may get swollen, red, and stuck in a bent or trigger position. Pain and tenderness in palm.
White Finger/ Raynaud's Phenomenon	Caused by exposure to cold or vibration. The vibration from tools and cold causes a pinching off of the blood vessels which carry blood to the fingers.	Numbness, tingling, or pain in the fingers, which may be pale, white, or cold.



Name of Musculoskeletal Disorder	What Happens Inside the Body	Signs or Symptoms Workers Should Know About
Carpal Tunnel Syndrome	The carpal tunnel is a narrow space in the wrist. The tendons and nerves that operate the hand pass through this tunnel. Repeated bending and twisting of the wrist can inflame the tendons that run through this tunnel, squeezing and pinching the nerve (median nerve) that also runs through this tunnel. Other causes include using vibrating tools such as a whizard knife, pinching or forceful finger exertions and circular twisting of the wrist (wringing action).	At first, hands may feel numb, or get a pins and needles feeling. This numbness often starts at night and is confined to the first four fingers of the hand. Then, as the nerves continue to get squeezed, the muscles in the hand can start to lose their strength and it becomes increasingly harder to grasp or hold things. Carpal Tunnel Syndrome is best treated if it is caught early. More advanced cases may require surgery—a treatment that is a last resort. The surgery may or may not be successful—the condition often recurs if the worker returns to the same job. To diagnose carpal tunnel syndrome, a disease of the nerve, a special test called an EMG is performed.
Lower Back Injuries	The discs in the back bulge or tear, or muscles may be pulled by frequent or awkward lifting and lifting heavy loads.	Pain in the back or legs. It may be hard to move the back. There may be some swelling.
Rotator Cuff Tendonitis	The most common tendon disorder of the shoulder. The tendons in the shoulder become inflamed from repetitive reaching above the shoulder or backwards.	Pain, tingling, or burning.
Epicondylitis/ Golfer's Elbow Tennis Elbow	The tendons of the elbow get inflamed from turning and bending the forearm and wrist over and over.	Pain on the inside or outside of the forearm/elbow. Radiating pain from outside of elbow down the forearm.

Check Your Job for Risk Factors

Does your job make you do these things over and over:

- Bend and/or twist your wrists? Twist your arms?
- Hold your elbows away from your body?
- Reach behind your body?
- Lift or throw things above your shoulders?
- Lift things from below your knees?
- Use a pinch grip?
- Work with your neck bent?
- Make forceful cuts on pieces of meat or parts of chicken?
- Lift heavy things?
- Use one finger or your thumb to operate a tool?
- Use a hand tool with hard, sharp edges?
- Use a tool that vibrates?
- Use your hand like a tool or a hammer?
- Work in the cold?



If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you may be in danger of getting a Musculoskeletal Disorder. Tell your company and your union steward your job has risk factors that make your job dangerous!

This material was produced under grant number 46C5DT27 from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, US Department of Labor. It does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Labor, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

