A stylized, light brown silhouette of a human torso, showing the neck, shoulders, and back, positioned on the left side of the page.

Managing musculoskeletal pain in staff working from home

Briefing pack for managers and team leaders
May 2020

What?

This briefing pack is designed to help you support your team during the Covid-19 restrictions where they may be working from home much more than usual. This has the potential to cause an increase in musculoskeletal (MSK) pain. The briefing pack summarises the current best evidence about managing MSK pain. This evidence falls broadly into three themes: prevention, reducing impact and supporting return to work.

It is designed to introduce the most up-to-date evidence-based and novel approaches to managing MSK pain in a way that helps you apply these within your teams. It will also cover how to support staff to access equipment that might help them while working from home.

Why?

Reducing MSK issues in our Trust is really important; especially now many staff may be working from home to a greater or lesser degree, for a sustained period:



MSK problems are the Trust's second biggest cause of absence. But, during the Covid-19 pandemic, with more people working from home it's possible this might be magnified. Things like sitting down for lots more time than usual, workload pressures, the stresses and strains of working in new and unfamiliar ways and less than ideal computer/desk set up, not to mention the increased impact of psychological issues, can all lead to more MSK issues. It is therefore important to look at ways to prevent, or reduce the impact of these problems on the organisation, teams and on individuals, when they do happen.

MSK issues can affect teams in financial terms, or there could be a clinical cost, where service delivery is affected. There are also the effects on the rest of the team to consider. Workloads may increase causing stress and long-term projects may have to take a back seat.

The cost to the individual is really important too. It's not nice being in pain and not able to do the things important to you. Especially if this affects how you're able to exercise or your mood with your family, both things that are absolutely key to health and wellbeing in the current climate.

It is accepted that pain is affected by lots of different factors. The most common way we think of pain is through a biopsychosocial model. That is, there are biological, psychological and social factors that all come together to make someone's pain experience. The balance between these factors will vary widely from person to person.

As a manager you are in an influential position to have a positive impact on these biopsychosocial factors. On the other hand, your actions have the potential for far-reaching negative consequences such as long-term absence, recurrence of problems and a reduction in how well a person is able to manage their pain.

How?



Inevitably many people will develop MSK issues at some point. The chances of developing MSK pain are higher if you spend a sustained part of your working day sitting down. It is therefore crucial to encourage staff to get up and move regularly throughout the working day, ideally every 30-60 minutes. The Trust physiotherapist has produced [a series of desk exercises](#) and during the pandemic is also releasing weekly 2 minute desk exercise videos. You can find these sessions on the following channels:

Twitter [@JoeLoftusPhysio](#)

[Staff Facebook Group](#)

[YouTube "The Occ Health Physio"](#).

None of this replaces keeping physically active, which is the single most important thing you can do to reduce MSK pain related to home working. Whether it's running, cycling, a brisk walk or online exercise it really doesn't matter. The key thing is that it's exercise of at least moderate intensity.

Lots of people worry about developing pain because they're working from home a lot more and might not have the usual desk set up they have at work. The simple answer here is that if it's comfortable then it's OK. Don't worry too much about posture as what is comfortable is really very individual. In fact, staying static in any posture is much more likely to cause pain than slouching, just keep moving and vary your position.

That said, some people will find they're missing the equipment they have in the office, their chair isn't comfortable or they're struggling hunched over their laptop. Individual advice and guidance can be accessed if required on [carrying out DSE assessment](#) whilst remote working. If colleagues feel they need to access equipment from work, such as an office chair or computer screen to improve their home workstation environment they should discuss and agree this with their line manager. Line managers should record equipment details where it has been agreed for it to be used at home by a member of staff. If support is required to transport equipment from office base to home, this can be provided by the Logistics department, please contact logistics.lypft@nhs.net to arrange this. A portering request form must be completed and must include phone numbers for the recipient and the authorising line manager. Please stipulate specifically where the furniture/equipment is currently and will be relocated to (e.g ground floor, first floor etc).

The flip side of this is that lots of people are taking the chance to exercise more than usual. This is great, but has the potential to lead to MSK pain if someone starts an unfamiliar activity at a level they aren't yet ready for or are exercising way more than usual. Just like in sport, preventing injury means building up gradually; the couch to 5K plan is an excellent example of this gradual build up.

If a colleague does develop an MSK problem there is lots you can consider to prevent it resulting in absence. Having a cooperative, constructive



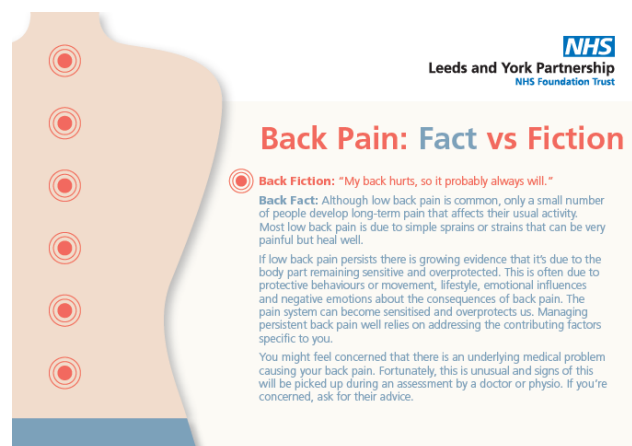
conversation to agree any simple, temporary adjustments at work is a quick and effective way of going about this. This is also a great time to signpost to the Occupational Health Physiotherapy service via self-referral or to make a management referral, especially if you've got any specific questions you'd like guidance on. [To make a management referral, complete the online management referral process](#). For further queries, or for staff to self-refer, email joseph.loftus@nhs.net or call the Occupational Health Admin Team on 01924 316031.

Our physio appointments are currently provided by video calling and are a great way to access quick assessment and advice for you as a manager and for your member of staff which might help nip a problem in the bud.

Reduce impact

Most people are well versed in identifying and addressing any physical factors at work that are causing or aggravating an MSK issue. Whether it's an uncomfortable chair or laptop or workload resulting in people feeling unable to take a break to move away from the desk, there are often common sense adjustments that allow someone to recover and progress back to their usual function.

Research in recent years has shown that other things strongly affect how much impact MSK pain (especially back/neck pain) has on a person's work and functional ability too. Things like having really negative beliefs or a poor understanding of back pain can mean a person does not recover as well. Other things like stress, anxiety and depression, conflict in the workplace or other work issues, as well as family or personal issues, can also have a negative effect on pain and function. All of these issues may be easily amplified during the current pandemic.



As a manager you are in an influential position to use positive language about pain, to constructively challenge faulty beliefs about pain and bust myths as well as promoting a positive culture in your team about managing pain and MSK issues. **For more information about back pain myths and how you can help tackle them, click on the image to the left to download our back pain myths flyer.**

Your relationship with your colleagues has the potential to allow you to explore other factors that might be contributing to an MSK problem, like stress, family problems or feeling isolated and anxious which might not otherwise come to light.

Case study

"Like lots of people I started working from home. After a week or so my neck started to become quite uncomfortable which could be really distracting and I stopped running as I was worried that the impact would jar it and make things worse."

I was also caring for my mother who has underlying health conditions and this plus juggling childcare, shopping and the difficulties of working away from my team was making me feel stressed and tense.

I spoke to the physio who gave me some simple exercises, assured me it was OK to keep running and I started using a relaxation App too. But what really helped was discussing my problems with my manager who reassured me that I shouldn't feel tied to my laptop and we negotiated how I could vary my work to allow me to feel more relaxed about taking care of the other parts of my life.

I still get the occasional ache but things are much better. If I hadn't had the support from my manager I really think my stress and tension would have stopped me improving as much as I have."

This case highlights brilliantly how negative thoughts and emotions can impact on the way we experience pain and can be a big barrier to getting back to moving normally and reducing pain.

Support available to you includes a dedicated mental health nurse in our Occupational Health and Wellbeing department, as well as a host of other professionals dedicated to your health and wellbeing. This is in addition to the access to counselling and support services through our independent Employee Assistance Programme, Health Assured. To contact the 24-hour confidential telephone counselling service please call **0800 030 5182**.

Support return to work



Having an open and constructive conversation about what you can and can't do to support a return to work (RTW) is a great start. Often when a person is off work they lack clarity about what will be expected of them in the short term upon their RTW which can make them feel anxious and be a barrier to them getting back in a timely manner. Ask what they think would help them. Discuss reasonable adjustments you could make on a temporary basis, or a phased return if appropriate. Be confident to make these adjustments.

If a colleague is off work with an MSK issue it is expected that they will be referred to Occupational Health. Discuss this with the member of staff and agree what questions you'd both like advice on from the Physio/Occupational Health Advisor. This is designed to allow you to agree a return to work plan with the individual. Agreeing this plan sooner rather than later can help you plan how your team will operate in the interim while reassuring the person who is off work.

Once the member of staff returns to work make sure the plan is implemented, monitored and adapted as needed.

Want more info?

Occupational Health

T: 01924 316031

E: occupationalhealth.lypft@nhs.net or Joseph.loftus@nhs.net

Follow on Twitter for updates @JoeLoftusPhysio and @SWYPFTOH

Useful links

[Visit the Occupational Health pages on Staffnet.](#)

[Watch a series of desk-based exercise videos.](#)

[Download the NHS Employers 'Back Pack'.](#)

Visit the [Staff Health and Wellbeing website](#) where you can find the health and wellbeing pack.

Employee Assistance Programme – Health Assured

You can access [the Health Assured website](#) for information and advice on a wide variety of areas including physical and emotional health and wellbeing. You can also download their app for free – just search “**Health e-hub**” in the **App Store** or **Play Store**.

Download the [psychological survival guide for working from home](#).