

Ergonomic Safety in Seasonal Work Settings



When employers think about seasonal workplace hazards, weather-related risks like heat stress, icy surfaces, or reduced daylight often come to mind. However, one critical safety consideration is frequently overlooked: ergonomics. As work demands change with the seasons, so do the physical demands placed on employees. Whether they're lifting landscaping materials in the spring, harvesting crops in the fall, clearing snow in the winter, or spending long hours at a desk during peak administrative periods, workers across virtually every industry face ergonomic risks that evolve throughout the year.

For occupational health and safety (OHS) directors and HR managers, recognizing these seasonal changes is essential to preventing musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), improving productivity, and supporting long-term employee well-being.

How Seasonal Changes Affect Ergonomic Risks

Ergonomics is the science of designing work to fit the worker, rather than forcing the worker to adapt to the job. Poor ergonomic conditions can place unnecessary stress on muscles, joints, tendons, and ligaments, increasing the risk of injury over time.

Seasonal changes can significantly alter workplace conditions and employee movements. Cooler temperatures may reduce flexibility and muscle function, making strains and sprains more likely. Additional layers of clothing can restrict movement, making lifting tasks more awkward. Wet or uneven terrain may force workers into unstable postures, while increased workloads during seasonal peaks can lead to repetitive motion injuries and fatigue.

Understanding how these environmental and operational changes influence worker movement is the first step toward reducing injury risk.

Ergonomic Considerations Across Different Work Environments

Construction and Outdoor Trades

Construction workers experience changing ergonomic challenges throughout the year. During fall and winter, heavier clothing and gloves can reduce grip strength and range of motion, making manual material handling more difficult. Uneven, muddy, icy, or snow-covered surfaces require workers to compensate with awkward body positions that increase strain on the lower back and joints.

Seasonal projects such as roofing repairs, infrastructure maintenance, and utility work may also require prolonged overhead work or repetitive lifting, placing additional stress on shoulders, necks, and backs.

Manufacturing and Warehousing

Manufacturing facilities often experience seasonal production increases ahead of holidays or year-end deadlines. Higher production volumes may result in longer shifts, increased repetitive tasks, and reduced recovery time between movements.

Workers performing repetitive assembly, packaging, or material handling may develop cumulative trauma injuries if workstations are not adjusted to meet changing production demands. Cooler warehouse temperatures can also reduce dexterity, making precision tasks more physically demanding.

Landscaping, Agriculture, and Grounds Maintenance

Seasonal industries face dramatic shifts in workload throughout the year. Spring planting, summer maintenance, fall harvesting, and autumn cleanup often require prolonged bending, lifting, pushing, pulling, and carrying.

Repetitive use of hand tools, chainsaws, trimmers, leaf blowers, and other powered equipment can contribute to hand-arm vibration syndrome, tendon injuries, and muscle fatigue if equipment is poorly maintained or workers receive inadequate recovery time.

Office and Remote Work Environments

Ergonomic risks aren't limited to physically demanding jobs. Office employees frequently experience seasonal workload spikes during budgeting, planning cycles, tax preparation, enrollment periods, or year-end reporting.

Longer hours at computer workstations without proper posture, monitor placement, chair adjustment, or movement breaks can contribute to neck pain, lower back discomfort, eye strain, headaches, and repetitive strain injuries affecting the wrists and hands.

Shorter daylight hours may also reduce opportunities for movement during breaks, encouraging prolonged sitting throughout the workday.

The Cost of Ignoring Ergonomic Risks

Musculoskeletal disorders remain one of the leading causes of workplace injuries across North America. Unlike sudden accidents, ergonomic injuries often develop gradually, making them easy to overlook until they become chronic conditions.

When ergonomic risks aren't addressed, organizations may experience:

- Increased workers' compensation claims
- Higher absenteeism
- Reduced productivity
- Increased employee fatigue
- Higher turnover
- Longer recovery times
- Reduced morale
- Increased risk of secondary workplace incidents caused by fatigue or discomfort

Employees working in pain may also become distracted, reducing concentration and increasing the likelihood of errors or safety violations.

Building an Ergonomically Sound Workplace

Creating an effective ergonomics program requires ongoing evaluation rather than one-time adjustments. Managers should regularly assess how seasonal changes affect work activities and modify work environments accordingly.

Conduct Seasonal Ergonomic Assessments

Job tasks should be reviewed whenever work processes change. Observe how workers lift, carry, reach, push, pull, or perform

repetitive movements during different seasons. Small adjustments to workflow can often eliminate unnecessary strain.

Provide Proper Equipment

Mechanical lifting aids, adjustable workstations, anti-fatigue mats, ergonomic hand tools, and properly fitted PPE can significantly reduce physical stress. Equipment should be maintained regularly to ensure it continues to operate safely and efficiently.

Encourage Job Rotation

Rotating workers between tasks that use different muscle groups helps reduce repetitive strain and allows fatigued muscles time to recover. Job rotation can be especially valuable during busy seasonal periods with repetitive work.

Promote Stretching and Movement

Brief warm-up exercises before physically demanding work and regular movement breaks throughout the day help improve circulation, reduce stiffness, and prepare muscles for repetitive tasks. For office workers, encouraging employees to stand, stretch, or walk for a few minutes each hour can reduce discomfort associated with prolonged sitting.

Train Supervisors and Workers

Employees should understand proper lifting techniques, workstation setup, early signs of musculoskeletal disorders, and the importance of reporting discomfort before minor issues become serious injuries. Supervisors play a key role in recognizing ergonomic hazards and responding proactively.

Ergonomics Is a Year-Round Investment

Seasonal changes affect every workplace differently, but the need for ergonomic safety remains constant. By adapting work practices to changing environmental conditions, workload demands, and employee needs, organizations can reduce injuries while improving comfort, efficiency, and morale.

An effective ergonomics program is an investment in workforce health, operational performance, and long-term organizational success. As seasons change, so should the strategies used to protect the people performing the work.