Spot The Safety Violation: Don’t Get Bent out of Shape

How is this worker’s back going to feel at the end of the day after spending hours working in this awkward, bent-over position’

Feb. 29, 2016 is the 17th International Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) Awareness Day. RSIs, also called musculoskeletal injuries or disorders (MSIs or MSDs), typically affect

tendons, muscles, nerves and joints in the neck, shoulders and upper back; hips, knees and feet; elbows, forearms and hands.

Awareness of RSIs is so important because these kinds of injuries are among the most common workplace injuries. They can be caused by many things, including awkward working positions and poor posture.

For example, the worker in this picture from elcosh is working hunched over in an awkward position. Bending at the waist for extended periods of time can cause back strain or injury.

Moreover, there's no reason for the worker to be doing this task in this awkward position. For instance, he could smooth the cement in a kneeling position or use appropriate tools or equipment.

TAKE 3 STEPS TO PREVENT RSIS

The OHS laws in all Canadian jurisdictions'either expressly or implicitly'require employers to protect workers from developing RSIs by addressing ergonomics-related hazards. To comply with these requirements, employers should take these steps:

Step #1: Identify possible ergonomics-related hazards. First, you should evaluate the workplace for possible ergonomics'related hazards by:

- Prioritizing the jobs and equipment for assessment by ranking them from lowest to highest level of risk so you can focus your assessment efforts on the most hazardous jobs and equipment;
- Reviewing injury records, including first aid reports, workers' comp claims, incident reports, workers' complaints and JHSC meeting minutes, to identify patterns of injuries (or potential injuries), which will help you spot the jobs, equipment and workstations that may expose workers to RSIs;

- Observing workers performing their duties to determine if there are any risk factors present; and/or
- Using a symptoms survey of workers to measure the extent of symptoms of RSIs in each area of the workplace and determine which jobs are causing workers pain and/or discomfort.

Step #2: Assess the identified hazards. After you've identified potential ergonomics-related hazards, assess their risk to determine whether any of the identified hazards are of a sufficient magnitude to cause concern and thus require appropriate steps to eliminate or minimize workers' risk of exposure to them. The three critical parameters that should be considered in the assessment of exposure to an ergonomics-related hazard are:

- Intensity;
- Duration; and
- Frequency.

Step #3: Implement measures to address these hazards. The results of your assessment will help you prioritize which hazards to address and in which order based on how effectively you can address the problems. You can do so by considering:

- The severity of the hazard;
- The complexity of its causes;
- Potential costs of changing the workstation, equipment, procedures, etc.; and
- Availability of technology to address causes.

You should then implement appropriate measures to address the priority hazards. For example, if workers are in an awkward posture when doing a particular job, such as the one in the picture, you can address that hazard by:

- Changing the height, reach or orientation of the work or the workstation, equipment and/or tools;
- Using adjustable stands;

- Providing appropriate tools so workers can avoid awkward positions;
- Using turntables or conveyors to bring items closer to workers; and
- Using tilted work surfaces and spring-loaded surfaces.

OHS Insider's Ergonomics Compliance Centre has many resources that you can use to raise awareness of RSIs and protect workers from developing these injuries, including:

- 5 mistakes to avoid in managing your ergonomics program
- Steps workers can take to help address ergonomics-related hazards
- Preventing MSIs in office spaces
- A case study on a textile plant in Ontario that saved almost $300,000 from its ergonomics program
- Seven strategies to ensure that your ergonomics program is successful.

And here are just some of the many model forms, checklists, policies, etc. you can download, adapt and use in your own workplace to address this class of workplace injuries:

- 10 commandments of ergonomics
- Ergonomics-related injury records review form
- Model Ergonomics Policy
- Pushing/Pulling Risk Assessment Form
- Lifting Hazard Assessment Checklist
- Office Ergonomics Risk Factor Checklist
- Manual Handling Checklist
- Model Worker MSI Symptom Survey
- Ergonomic Risk Factor Checklist
- Checklist for Evaluating Ergonomics Programs.