

Spot The Safety Violation: Oh, My Aching Back



How do you think these workers' backs are going to feel after spending hours working in this position? Is there a safer way to do this job?



October is Global Ergonomics Month. So it's an appropriate time to focus on the ergonomics-related hazards in your workplace that can cause musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs).

For example, the workers in this picture from elcosh are hunched over in a posture that puts stress on their backs. And although tying rebar all day is repetitive, stressful work, rebar tying tools have been developed to reduce worker injuries from such work. So there's no reason for these workers to be doing this task in this awkward position.

Identify, Assess & Address Ergonomics-Related Hazards

The OHS laws in all Canadian jurisdictions'either expressly or implicitly'require employers to protect workers from ergonomics-related hazards, including awkward postures. To protect workers from such hazards and comply with the OHS requirements, employers should:

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 MSIs;
- 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 MSIs in each area of the workplace and determine which jobs are causing workers pain and/or discomfort.

Assess the identified hazards. Once you've identified potential ergonomics-related hazards, assess their risk. The purpose of the assessment is 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.

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;
- Avoiding awkward postures, such as by using rebar-tying guns;
- 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 additional information, case studies, tools and other resources to help you protect workers from MSIs, including:

- Seven strategies for making your ergonomics program a success
- A case study of a textile plant in Ontario that saved almost \$300,000 from its ergonomics program
- Ergonomic Risk Factor Checklist
- Lifting Hazard Assessment Checklist
- Checklist for Evaluating Ergonomics Programs
- Form for Investigating Neck, Shoulder and Upper Back Injuries
- Form for Investigating Injuries to the Hips, Knees and Feet
- Form for Investigating Elbow, Forearm and Hand Injuries.