Occupational Overuse Injury (OOS)

**What is OOS?**

Occupational Overuse Syndrome (OOS), also known as Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI), is a term used for conditions that are characterised by persistent pain or discomfort in muscles, tendons and other soft tissue.

Conditions resulting from OOS can include:

* Carpal Tunnel Syndrome – occurs when the median nerve, which runs from the forearm into the hand, becomes pressed or squeezed at the wrist. This causes numbness and tingling in the fingers and hand.
* Tenosynovitis – is the swelling of tendons which causes pain mainly in the hands and wrists.
* Epicondylitis – condition where the elbow becomes painful and tender.

**What causes OOS?**

OOS is generally an occupational-related condition, usually caused by mixture of poor ergonomics, repetitive motion, stress and poor posture.

Common causes include:

* Continual use of computer keyboards and mouse components,
* Using workbenches that are too high or too low, this puts your body in awkward positions for long lengths of time;
* Badly designed tools which require excessive force to use;
* Poor work station layout;
* Twisting or stretching to perform repetitive tasks.

According to the Australian Safety and Compensation Commission (ASCC), the occupations most at risk for suffering from OOS are:

* Process work (assembly line, sorting, packing and press operation);
* Piece work (clothing machinists at home or in a factory);
* Office work (keyboard, typing, clerical work);
* Mail sorting;
* Kitchen work;
* Cleaning;
* Hairdressers;
* Musicians;
* Construction workers (bricklayers, carpenters, plumbers and tilers).

**What are the symptoms of OOS?**

Symptoms of OOS can include numbness, swelling, pain, stiffness, weakness or tingling in the hands, wrists, elbows, shoulders, back, neck and lower limbs.

Often discomfort brought on by a particular task will improve when it is stopped i.e. if the pain lessens or disappears over weekends or during holidays.

If the discomfort begins in one area but then spreads to other parts of the body – this may manifest as sore shoulders, neck pain, stiffness in the limbs and hands.

It is important to remember that any physical discomfort should be reported to OHS representatives and should be taken seriously by management.

**Treating OOS**

The symptoms of OOS can render a worker incapable of carrying out even simple tasks if they have severe OOS with restricted movement of limbs and loss of grip – so early detection and treatment of OOS is vital to a worker’s prognosis.

The main treatment for OOS is resting the limb from aggravating factors such as the particular task that caused the injury and any other related duties.

Secondary treatments aim to help relieve existing symptoms, including:

* Medication – anti-inflammatory/painkillers
* Physiotherapy
* Massage
* Acupuncture
* Surgery

Early detection and treatment increases the likelihood that the condition will be reversed or symptoms eased.

**How can you prevent OOS?**

Consultation between workers and OHS representatives on job procedures and design, organisation and layout will assess any likelihood of future problems.

Suggestions on what to look for include:

* Assess a worker’s sitting or standing position, in relation to their work station – good ergonomic practice should be integrated into the workplace;
* Work should be organised to mix repetitive tasks with non-repetitive tasks;
* Introduce short rest breaks every hour;
* Train workers to use gentle exercises and stretches at the workstation to reduce muscle tension;
* Vary workload – for example if you have a lot of typing to do, try and break it up with another task or short breaks;
* Change to an ergonomic keyboard or mouse – if the condition already exists this will not cure the problem but may help to ease the discomfort;
* Allow employees to govern the pace at which they work – refrain from exerting undue pressure upon staff to secure maximum output, being especially vigilant where bonuses and rates of pay relate to the amount of repetitive work.
* Keep records of the incidence of OOS among employees – this may help prevent or alert possible future cases of OOS.

**Legal requirements**

All employers have a duty to provide a healthy and safe workplace for their employees, this includes:

* Providing appropriately designed equipment and work stations for the job, i.e. adjustable furniture, ergonomically designed chairs and desks;
* Making sure employees are trained in safe work practices – correct posture and the use of tools;
* Ensuring tools used for repetitive tasks are ergonomically sound i.e. comfortable size, weight and shape.
* Regularly maintaining equipment;
* Considering OHS implications for any new equipment before purchase;
* Keeping a record of all OOS reported; and
* Taking steps to stop or alleviate the aggravating factors in the workers job design.