

CREW HEALTH ADVICE

Crew Health Advice: Musculoskeletal disorders

What are they and how can you prevent them.

Musculoskeletal disorders is a term used when a person suffers from an injury or a repetitive activity that affects the body's structural support system that allows for movement. The following structures can be involved:

- Muscles – These are collections of fibrous tissues that have the ability to contract and relax to allow movement or to maintain the body's position.
- Tendons – These attach muscles to bones and are made up of strong fibrous collagen tissue that is flexible but not stretchy.
- Ligaments – These short bands of tough, flexible fibrous connective tissue attach bone to bone or cartilage or hold joints together.
- Bones – A rigid structure that serves several purposes. They protect our internal organs, support the body structurally and allow us to move.

As far as damage to the musculoskeletal system goes there are many different types but in order to look at prevention it is often useful to know how each structure is damaged.

- Muscles, Tendons and Ligaments – These can be overstretched, torn or ruptured
- Bones – These can be fractured (a description for any kind of break, chip or crack in the bone)

Musculoskeletal disorders are one of the most commonly reported physical problems experienced in the workplace and for the most part they can be prevented.

In this article we will look at some simple ways to prevent these types of disorders. The series will go on to look at some of the more common types of injuries sustained and what can be done onboard to manage them.

Prevention is better than cure

This is a common phrase in the medical community and never more so than with musculoskeletal disorders. These disorders can take significant time to heal and often require specialist intervention to assist with the process. What people often don't realise is just how long and how much work it takes to recover fully, therefore the rehabilitation process isn't always completed and the person is plagued with ongoing issues relating to the original problem. This can mean significant time off work. So, why let it happen at all? Let's work hard to prevent the issues in the first place to avoid lengthy rehabilitation and, sometimes lifelong problems as a result of the initial problem.

How do these injuries happen?

Many happen due to an acute injury and many happen simply from overuse or repetitive use. Body positioning is also a causative factor.

As an example:

"A crew member who is moving stores from the dock onboard lifts a heavy box and feels sudden pain in the lower back. This is an acute injury and the cause is poor manual handling technique. Why? The box could have been too heavy for the crew member, or they may have used an incorrect lifting technique which placed a greater strain on the muscles of the lower back."

"One of the crew members really enjoys watching box sets on their laptop after they have finished work and develops pain in the neck and shoulders from poor posture when hunched over their laptop screen. This is a case of poor posture and is the cause of the pain rather than an acute injury. Why? Perhaps the crew member has limited space and cannot



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look at the laptop in any other way or perhaps they are unaware that poor posture will lead to musculoskeletal problems.”

The examples described above are just a couple of common ways of how musculoskeletal pain can develop.

Here are some top tips for preventing musculoskeletal disorders:

1. All tasks that require manual handling will have had a risk assessment carried out. Make sure you read this and follow the instructions contained within it. Always ask if you are unsure.
2. Personally risk assess the task you are about to perform. Ensure that you are not trying to lift or move something that will over exert you or put excessive strain on your musculoskeletal system.
3. If you are supervising within the workplace then make sure you are enforcing the risk assessments and that you are looking out for any poor techniques or potential accidents and stop them before they happen.
4. Ensure you have received training for tasks that require manual handling. Good form and technique is essential to prevent injury.
5. Look at different ways of moving/lifting things. Is there any equipment that could help you? Are there any extra people that could share the load?
6. Give yourself as much space as possible to carry out the task.
7. Avoid twisting whilst working with heavy loads.
8. If you are working with display equipment then make sure you have had a proper workstation assessment to make sure your position and posture is optimised.
9. Make sure you take regular breaks away from your workstation and move your arms and legs.
10. Should you feel any aches or pains, don't ignore them. Think back to what you have been doing and see if you can pinpoint the time that you first felt discomfort.
11. Report any symptoms earlier rather than later. Musculoskeletal injuries respond better to early treatment.
12. If you are planning a new exercise regime then take advice first. Many injuries are caused by going to the gym and lifting weights that are too heavy or incorrectly carrying out exercises.
13. Keep moving. Inactivity is not just bad for our internal health but also bad for our musculoskeletal health. Muscle wastage, reduced bone density resulting in more brittle bones, joints becoming stiff – all of this can be caused by inactivity.

This advice was compiled in collaboration with Red Square Medical, who offer a full range of maritime medical services, from training and consultancy services, right through to mass casualty incident planning and training.

www.redsquaremedical.com

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The Club was the first to launch a crew health scheme in 1996 due to increasing crew illness claims and a lack of accountability of clinics. Since 1996, the Crew Health programme has become one of the Club's leading loss prevention initiatives. The aim of the programme is to reduce the volume and value of crew illness claims which are caused by a pre-existing illnesses or disease. These underlying conditions often impact on the crew member's fitness for service and can endanger not only the health of the seafarer but also the onboard safety of other crew.

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Sophia joined Thomas Miller in 1992 and from 1994 worked as a claims handler dealing mainly with French and Spanish Members. In 2004, Sophia became the Crew Health Programme Director. Sophia has undertaken a large number of clinic audits, implemented the standard medical

form and clinic guidelines. She has also lead the scheme through the largest period of growth and development with a doubling of approved clinic facilities and a four fold member increase. Sophia is a Director of Thomas Miller & Co. Ltd.

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Saidul Alom joined Crew Health from the European Region Service Team in 2004. Saidul provides administrative support to the Crew Health programme and is responsible for liaison with the approved clinics on financial billing matters and ensuring prompt payment of all clinic fees.

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Stuart joined Thomas Miller in 1998 as a claims trainee for UK P&I Club's Greek Members. In April 2005 Stuart joined Crew Health as the Team Administrator. Stuart is responsible for co-ordination of Member entries and administration for the clinic approval process.