








# Managing chronic musculoskeletal disorders in the workplace

**A Practical Guide for employers and managers**





# Contents

	<b>About the author</b>	4
	<b>Introduction</b>	5
	<b>Chapter One:</b> Why is musculoskeletal health important at work?	6
	<b>Chapter Two:</b> Staying healthy at work is easier than you think	9
	<b>Chapter Three:</b> Recommendations and examples	13
	<b>Chapter Four:</b> Other resources and contact details	17
	<b>Conclusion</b>	21

# About the author



**Dr Glykeria  
Skamagki**

Glykeria is a musculoskeletal physiotherapist specialising in occupational health. She has been working as an academic and a researcher since 2014.

Currently, she is working at the University of Birmingham in the UK as an Assistant Professor in Physiotherapy within the School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences. She is also a committee member of the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Occupational Health and Ergonomics (ACPOHE).

Her passion is education and the promotion of health and well-being at work.



**Check out her personal accounts for further information,** collaborations and new research projects.

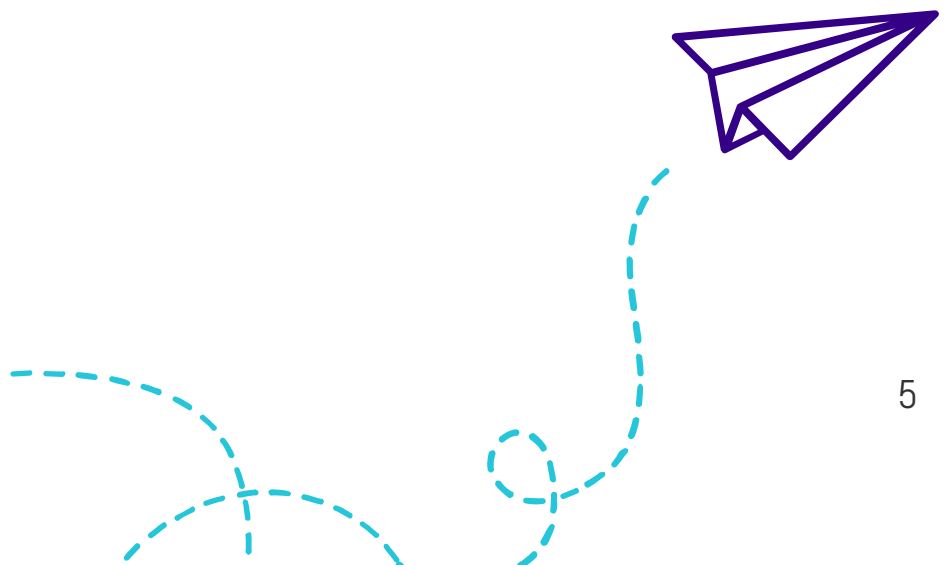
You can email Glykeria here:  
**[g.skamagki@bham.ac.uk](mailto:g.skamagki@bham.ac.uk)**

# Introduction

Employers and managers are often concerned about chronic musculoskeletal disorders due to the impact on employees' ability to work. **For example, 7.8 million days (19,7%) were lost in 2019 due to musculoskeletal conditions (The Office of National Statistics, 2019).**

Employers have a legal duty to provide safe workplaces that do not harm employees' health. Due to demographic changes, the move towards **sustained employability** over the longer-term poses many challenges for **older employees**.

This booklet will provide you with advice, examples and tips for supporting the musculoskeletal health of older employees and reducing workplace absence. **If you are wondering how you can support your employees then this booklet is for you.**



# Why musculoskeletal health is important at work?

Chapter

# One

Chronic musculoskeletal disorders (CMSDs) are one of the major health issues affecting European workplaces. These disorders include a range of **inflammatory and degenerative conditions and syndromes** that last more than 12 weeks and share some common characteristics such as pain, stiffness or reduced mobility. However, due to the intermittent nature and diverse symptoms, CMSDs may go unnoticed in the workplace as they may be "**non-visible**".



**The need for action is recognised by the UK government and the involvement of the employer and manager is crucial**

Factors such as **demographic changes**, the need for economic restructuring, and the necessity of working longer have presented challenges for both employers and employees.

A large survey study involving over 1000 organisations estimated that 89% of companies had observed **presenteeism** (staying at work unwell) in the last year (CIPD 2020). Presenteeism is more prevalent and costly than sickness absence! These statistics are expected to **increase** in the future as the population ages.



Listen to Teresa's comment about staying at work with pain



## Did you know?

A new phenomenon identified as **leaveism** (workers using their annual leave and continue to work) is increasing in workplaces especially due to restrictive attendance policies and work overload





The workforce has become remarkably diverse due to the integration of older employees, migrants and the substantial number of females entering the labour force.

Sally explained that her arthritis affects her ability to climb the stairs:



**"A couple of steps I can manage, but if it is a lot of steps, it just takes me ages to get to them."**

Poor musculoskeletal health results in significant costs not only for the older worker but also for the employer, the health service, and the wider economy.

The prevalence of musculoskeletal conditions (including CMSDs) remains high in women and those over the age of 50 regardless of the type of complaint.

## **Did you know?**

Women assuming caring roles within the family are affecting their health and the quality of their personal lives and work.



**Staying at  
work healthy  
is easier than  
you might  
think!**

Chapter

**tw**

# Supporting the ageing workforce is easier than you think!



Listen to what Jack said about his flexible work environment



## Workplace Values

Support employees in a way that works best for them and the organisation.

All it takes is effective communication, care and trust between you and the employee.

## One size does not fit all

Consider discussing employees health with healthcare professionals who are able to provide advice and support .

## Supportive Environment

Raising awareness in the workplace may benefit the ageing workforce with CMSDs and create a proactive work environment that discourages judgemental attitudes and promotes disclosure.

## Think holistically

Try to adopt a holistic approach considering personal, health and work-related factors

Remember to also consider the political context e.g. government policies on retirement, health and employment.

## Don't forget the importance of the manager's role

In a response to an online questionnaire, only **30%** of older employees indicated that they would get help from their supervisor or their line manager!

However, respondents who reported a **supportive** manager were also **aware** of the relevant strategies and felt **satisfied** with what was offered to them.

(Skamagki et al. 2022)





Managers are usually the **'face of the employer or organisation'** and they can act as a gatekeeper in directing employees to appropriate and available services

# Recommendations and examples

Chapter

# three

# Foster an empathetic working culture

1

Developing a collegial relationship with individual employees will assist you to identify the essential and relevant information you need to support them, for example, workplace policies and governmental work initiatives and schemes, that might be useful to them.

Through these conversations, you may encourage healthy behaviours, for example, invite them to participate in regular active breaks, create walking groups, and carry out routine exercises during a working day.



2

## Good communication

Good communication between employees, employers or managers is crucial and needs to be encouraged within the organisation.

It is particularly important to engage in conversations about employees' health, encourage disclosure and identify how employees are supported by organisational policies.

Managers can engage in health conversations, for example, using performance reviews as opportunities for feedback and learning instead of evaluation against strict targets.

# 3

## Provide individualised support

Develop straightforward processes by which employees can easily access relevant support at work. Implementing an individualised program in an organisation is an ongoing, long-term, multi-level and flexible strategy. It requires that employers and managers take a proactive approach to supporting employees with a CMSD and the creation of collaborative and realistic goals.

An individualised program allows time for reflection and encourages employee participation and communication.

# 4

## Provide Healthcare Services

Onsite or private Occupational Health Services (OHS) have the potential to support managers' role in providing quick healthcare access to employees with a CMSD.

Healthcare professionals working in OHS can also promote early health conversations and clear communication between various members of an organisation.

Healthcare professionals, like physiotherapists, are able to provide a well-structured exercise programme as part of their role.

# 5

## Create supportive groups

You can support regular health meetings, workplace health events, or wellbeing days.

Employees can invite relevant health and lifestyle speakers from registered health associations (e.g. Chartered Society of Physiotherapy) or other health charities.

In that way, employees could participate in such events and ask questions about their health, explore other self-management strategies, and network with others in the organisation.



## 6 Promote empathy

Invest in educational initiatives that promote empathy and facilitate stronger relationships between the manager and employees.

Developmental opportunities could include courses, such as developing emotional intelligence, effective communication skills or working in teams and explaining their influence in creating a healthy working environment.

These courses are important as they could decrease the tendency to stereotype and judge behaviours, and build the necessary skills to have productive conversations about musculoskeletal and mental health at work.

## 7 Acknowledge the role of colleagues'

Acknowledge the role of colleagues in acting as a link between employees with MSDs and the management team, for example, using a 'buddy system' or a 'wellbeing champion'.

Co-workers can also provide general assistance to those employees who would welcome assistance, for example, in performing difficult physical work tasks e.g. lifting, or by accepting alternative working arrangements that would support employees with MSDs.

Managers could also appoint a champion for wellbeing and musculoskeletal health to encourage employees with MSDs to participate in work exercise programmes such as outdoor activities and staff team sports.



# Other Resources

Chapter

four

# List of resources



Musculoskeletal Health Toolkit for Employers



Exercise advice leaflets- Versus Arthritis and the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy



Guidance on managing health and disability in the workplace



NICE guidance on Workplace health: management practices

## Key References

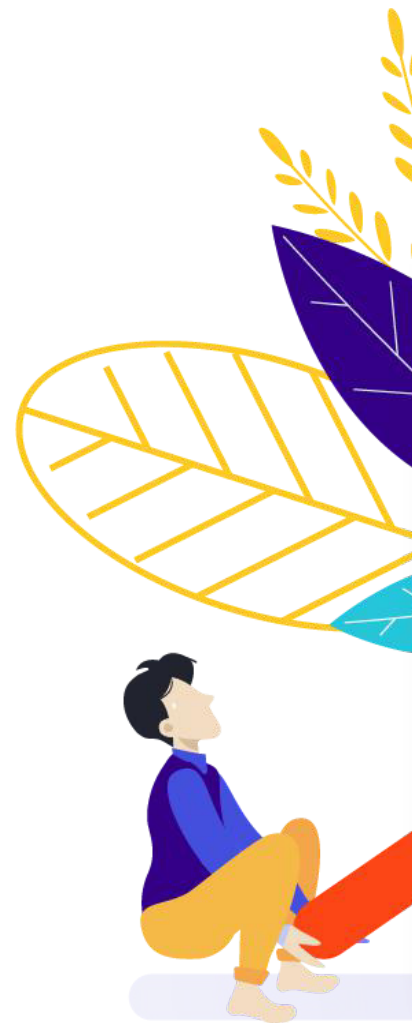
Skamagki, G., Carpenter, C., King, A., and Wåhlin, C. (2022) 'Management of Chronic Musculoskeletal Disorders in the Workplace from the Perspective of Older Employees: A Mixed Methods Research Study'. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* [online] 19 (15), 9348. [online] 19 (15), 9348.

CIPD (2020) *Health and Wellbeing at Work* [online] available from <[https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/health-and-well-being-2020-report\\_tcm18-73967.pdf](https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/health-and-well-being-2020-report_tcm18-73967.pdf)>

# Conclusion

Current challenges call for employers and managers to identify effective ways to support the ageing workforce and invest in training opportunities for managers and collaborative opportunities with healthcare professionals and other stakeholders.

A flexible, empathetic, and resourceful work environment is optimal for supporting sustained employability for an ageing workforce.







# UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Supported by

ppfef

HELPING PHYSIOTHERAPY MAKE A DIFFERENCE

liU LINKÖPING  
UNIVERSITY

Region  
Östergötland

Coventry  
University



PHYSIOSFORWORKANDHEALTH

[www.acpohe.org.uk](http://www.acpohe.org.uk)

ACPOHE

THE ASSOCIATION OF CHARTERED PHYSIOTHERAPISTS IN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND ERGONOMICS