








Managing chronic musculoskeletal disorders in the workplace

A Practical Guide for employees





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About the author



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

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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.

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Introduction

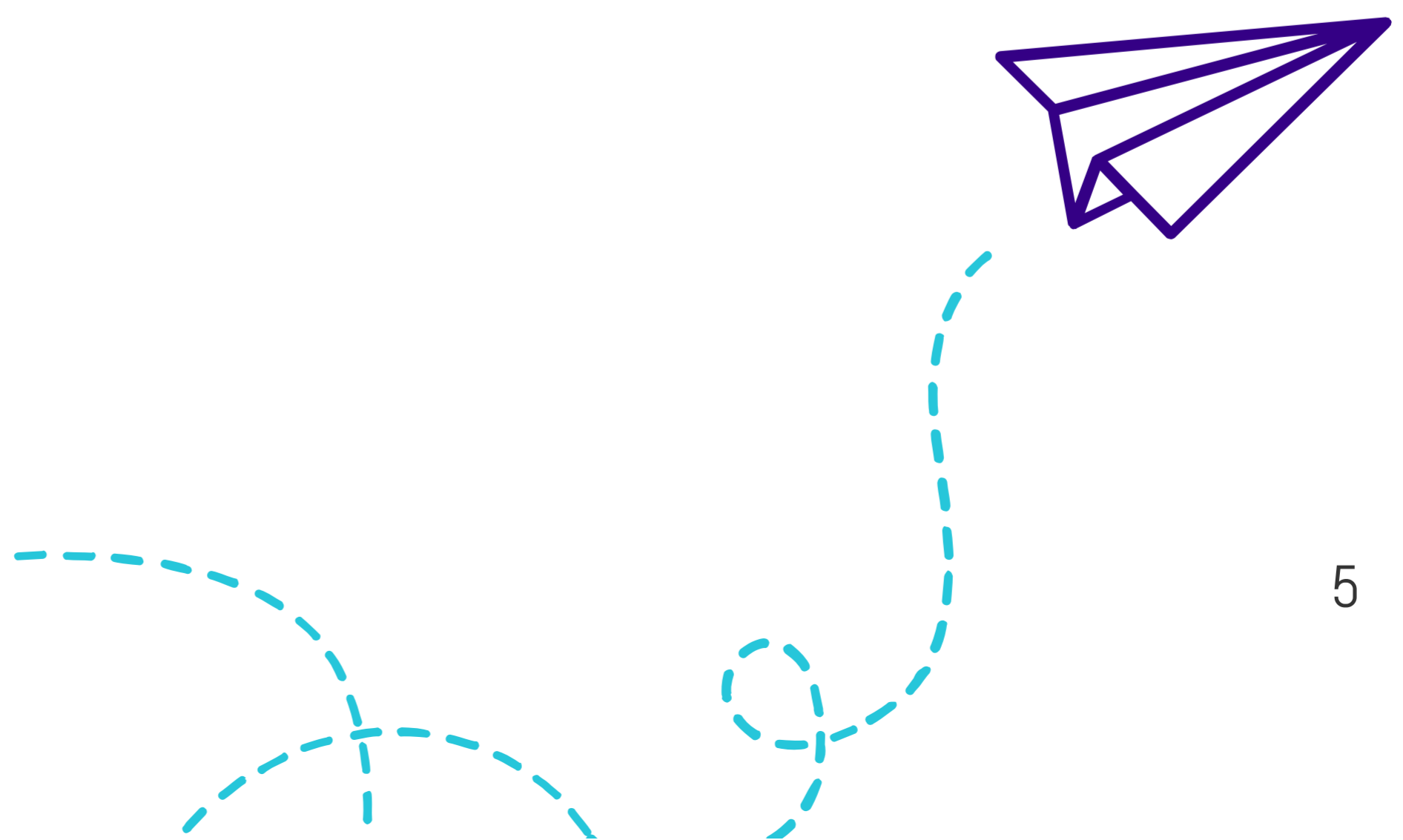
Workers are often concerned about their musculoskeletal health due to the impact on their ability to work. Many of you are aware that musculoskeletal disorders (including chronic and acute) are one of the major health issues in Europe's workplaces.

Moreover, demographic changes and the move toward **sustained employability** over the longer-term poses many challenges for **older workers**.

When it comes to taking care of your musculoskeletal health at work, having a plan is a great first step.

This booklet will provide you with recommendations, **advice and examples** to help you find what **works better for you** at work and fit into your **working routine**.

This is not an exhaustive list but it includes the key findings from our latest research study.



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.

Osteoarthritis and back pain are among the most common causes of long-term musculoskeletal pain in the UK and contribute to pain, frailty and disability which, in turn, challenge sustainable employability.



A healthy work environment is essential to increase work ability, reduce sick leave rates and enhance mental stimulation and physical benefits.

The prevalence of musculoskeletal disorders remains high in females and those over the age of 50 regardless of the type of the complaint.

CMSDs can affect working ability, decrease productivity and increase absenteeism or **presenteeism** (staying at work unwell). The current 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?

As people with CMSDs grow older, they may develop more than one chronic condition (known as co-morbidity or multimorbidity) in their lifetime, such as cardiovascular diseases, another CMSD, diabetes or depression.

One of our study participants explained that the new working trends of "hot-desking" or "agile work" affected negatively her chronic low back pain:



I think a big disadvantage is that there's no stationary position, a desk or a good chair. They did give us these rucksacks to put our laptop in but that's not good for my back because it is quite heavy.

Our study highlights the importance of open discussions about health matters, workplace adjustments and the design of realistic strategies that could reinforce employees' own efforts to manage their condition at work. However, it also appears that workers with CMSDs avoid disclosing their condition or asking for support at work.

Did you know?

Older employees assuming caring roles within the family are negatively affecting their health, the quality of their personal lives and their work ability.

Women more commonly compromise their career when the needs of children and other family members compete with work.

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

Chapter

1 **nwmn**

Managing CMSDs at work is easier than you think!



Listen to what Jack said about his flexible work environment

Open discussion

All it takes is effective communication, care and trust between you and the employer, manager and colleagues.

One size does not fit all

Consider discussing how your health affects your work with both a healthcare professional and your manager

Raise awareness

Raising awareness in the workplace may create a proactive work environment that discourages judgemental attitudes and promotes disclosure.

Create a management plan

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

There are many benefits to staying at work and having a plan will allow you to enjoy life after retirement

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

In a response to an online questionnaire, employees 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)

Remember that managers are the "gatekeepers" to supportive strategies and they will only be able to help you if you have engaged in health conversations at work.





The line manager will typically be the first point of contact if someone needs to discuss their health concerns or needs an adjustment to their work or working hours, to enable them to perform to their full potential.

Recommendations and examples

Chapter

three

1

Open Discussion about health

Have an open discussion with your manager about your health. It is important that you feel able to fully disclose information about your experience with a musculoskeletal condition in order that the individual (manager or employer), who is responsible for health and safety and employee welfare at work, can respond and make a plan with you appropriately.

2

Ask for support

Ask for individualised support if you think that your musculoskeletal health negatively affects how you feel about work or negatively affects how you work.

For example, explore the possibility of flexible working arrangements with your manager when you have a flare-up of your musculoskeletal condition or you are not feeling well.

You can also ask for support and guidance if your job requires moving and handling tasks.



3

Take responsibility

Take the responsibility of becoming familiar with the relevant workplace and leave policies or any governmental work initiatives and schemes that might be available to support you at work.

A collegial relationship with your manager will help you to find this sort of information or you could contact your Union representative or the human resources service.

5

Find supportive groups

It will help you to reach your health goals if you engage in conversations, join a group, and meet others with similar issues.

The support of your colleagues or a 'buddy' may provide social and /or emotional support and practical assistance.

Find out if there are any support groups at work or create one!

4

Talk about health

Don't be afraid to discuss your musculoskeletal condition with your manager or colleagues.

It is common for others to not understand what living with this type of condition is like and an explanation about e.g. your symptoms, or flare-ups and their impact of your work may help them be more empathetic and supportive.



6

Self-manage your condition

Be proactive and try to self-manage your condition at work. Research has highlighted that a self-management plan that includes **exercise** and access to **healthcare services** has been shown to be useful in managing a CMSD at work and in personal life.

Scheduling time, which is preferably endorsed by the organisation, with occupational health services at work or a healthcare professional, such as a physiotherapist, is a tangible way of obtaining the support and information needed to implement individualized self-management strategies at work.

If occupational health services are not available at work you may ask your healthcare professional to prescribe you some exercises that you can do.

7

Explore various strategies

Research has also highlighted some strategies that people found effective. For example, if your job involves a lot of standing or sitting, regular active breaks (walking at the park nearby) can help reduce your musculoskeletal symptoms.

You may also find it useful to change your working position regularly and carry out routine exercises. You could also learn some relaxation skills for unwinding the body and the mind e.g. meditation, mindfulness or yoga.



Other Resources

Chapter

four

List of resources



Keep moving at work-NAPO



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



Staying healthy at work



Managing your bone, joint or muscle pain-Chartered Society of Physiotherapy



Self-management Resources

Key References

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Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) (2020) *Help and Support for Older Workers*

Conclusion

Research highlights the importance of health conversations with the manager and other colleagues.

The role of self-management programmes and the importance of prescribed exercises are also emphasised.

Older employees with a CMSSD should take an active approach if long-term self-management is to be achieved and work-related health maintained.

Having a plan is a great first step in taking care of your musculoskeletal health at work.







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