

# Orthopaedic Observations

*A Matter of Medicine...*

*TM Pending*

## Recognizing Hazards in the Workplace

By Dave Spak, PTA, BS



Workplace injury prevention and maintaining a safe environment is a team effort. All occupations and types of industry are plagued with pitfalls and hazards inherent to their particular product or service. Recognizing these hazards is essential for avoiding them. According to the Occupational Safety and Health administration, (OSHA) a worker is injured every 5 seconds. In 2008, sprain or strain injuries accounted for 39 percent of total injury and illness cases requiring days away from work, 45 percent of those sprains or strains were the result of overexertion. Bodily reaction (such as bending, reaching, twisting, or slipping without falling) accounted for another 22 percent. Workplace hazards know no boundaries and can appear in any environment. Essentially, no one has a completely safe, hazard free job.

Office worker/business environment, although safe from the dangers of heavy machinery and automotive-related injury, do have workplace hazards that may not be as easily recognized as such. A large percentage of workplace injuries are classified as repetitive stress injury (RSI). RSI often occur with activity that we may take for granted, such as sitting for prolonged periods without movement, writing/typing, poor postural management may adversely affect your health and well-being if the conditions are correct. This classification of injury is the cause of musculoskeletal disorders afflicting nearly 7 percent of the working

population in the U.S. and, for the most part, can be prevented fairly easily. Recognition of a potential problem is the first step in avoiding injury. Most RSI can often be avoided by changing your routine with minor alterations. Simply put, “take the repetition out of the routine”, lessen the possibility of a repetitive stress injury. For example, sitting at a desk for 8 hours a day is a task many face every workday; being aware of your posture, especially when sitting is imperative for a healthy back. Taking precautions preemptively will help you stay healthy and avoid becoming one of the statistics of RSI. To reduce your chances of injury, take a few steps in avoiding the pitfalls...

- shorten prolonged static positioning; simply repositioning or standing up momentarily can reduce fatigue and stress on the body
- maintain a good postural awareness with your activity; smart body mechanics will reduce any undue stress and lower your risk
- make sure that your workstation is ergonomically situated for you and your work needs
- take an occasional break from your repetitious activities
- simple stretching at your work station can be helpful

Work conditions vary through the workforce, so let's travel to a completely different part of the work hazard spectrum. Construction, law enforcement and heavy equipment operation are just a small example of the physically taxing

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occupations that expose employees to a never-ending array of hazards while at work. As mentioned earlier, all occupations will have its own inherent hazards and pitfalls. When working on job sites, or as in law enforcement, a constantly changing environment; the employee must remain diligent about surveying their surroundings, thereby identifying and minimizing the hazards they are exposed to. In this type of case scenario, having and using the correct equipment for the job should be an important first step in avoiding possible injury. Job task safety and effectiveness are critically challenged when the necessary tools are not implemented. First and foremost, wearing the appropriate clothing and footwear is an important first step for the employee to avoid potential injury. Loose clothing can get caught in moving parts, become a fire hazard or fail to protect the employee from exposure to chemical agents being used. Utilizing machinery designed for the task at hand and in the correct manner will lessen the physical exertion of the worker, thus allowing increased productivity without increasing the danger of possible injury. The employee needs to have the understanding that...

- he/she is equally responsible with the employer in identifying possible hazards
- he/she should have the appropriate training prior to starting a job task
- he/she should not take on a job task that appears to be unsafe MSDS sheets (material safety data sheets) are kept for their purposes and the employees should be familiar with them.
- mechanical safeguards must be utilized at all times
- personal protective equipment (PPE) should be used at all times
- if an injury occurs, it needs to be reported immediately

Workplace injury happens every day, the key to reducing this injury is education. Have the understanding that your job, no matter what it may entail, has workplace hazards. A simple observation of your environment may help you in identifying them. Once these hazards are identified, take the appropriate steps to reduce your exposure to them.

The most important thing to be aware of; you are your first line of defense in avoiding injury.

*Dave graduated from Naugatuck Valley Community College with an A.S. degree in physical therapy in 2000. He continued his education at UConn receiving a B.S. degree in the BGS program with focused studies on healthcare and occupational safety and health in 2005. He has been a physical therapist assistant for 10 years with much of his experience dedicated towards the orthopedic patient population in acute, sub acute, out-patient and aquatics settings. In addition, Dave has advanced his knowledge-base in manual therapy techniques through his continuing education studies and is currently pursuing his CSCS. He has been with The Orthopaedic Group, in their ProPT division since 2009.*



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