



Healthy
Workplaces
LIGHTEN THE LOAD



Preventing musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) through active worker participation: good practice tips

Key points

- Employers are legally required to consult workers and their representatives concerning musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) risk factors and their prevention. Full worker participation goes beyond this.
- Worker participation is good for business and leads to the most appropriate solutions because workers and their representatives know how the job is done and how it affects them.
- Active worker participation should involve workers in all stages of MSD risk assessment and prevention, including hazard spotting, risk assessment, choosing and implementing solutions and review.
- Small businesses have the advantage of closer social relationships between owner(s)-manager(s) and workers who work and interact on a daily basis. In addition, there are simple ways they can use to involve workers in MSD prevention.

All info sheets and other campaign materials are available to download from EU-OSHA's Healthy Workplaces Campaign website (<https://healthy-workplaces.eu>).

Healthy Workplaces Lighten the Load

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) is running a Europe-wide campaign from 2020 to 2022 to raise awareness of work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and the importance of preventing them. The objective is to encourage employers, workers and other stakeholders to work together to prevent MSDs and to promote good musculoskeletal health among EU workers.

Active worker participation

Active worker participation involving workers and their representatives is essential for successful interventions to prevent MSDs. Active participation is where the workers who do the jobs are involved in both determining the MSD risk factors and deciding on measures to solve the problems. Workers have detailed knowledge of and experience in how the job is done and how it affects them.

Workers should be involved in all stages of MSD risk prevention, including identifying risk factors, assessing the risks, suggesting solutions and deciding which ones to implement, implementing the chosen solutions and monitoring and evaluating solutions.

Methods and tools

There are several methods and tools for worker participation. These include comprehensive participatory ergonomics programmes that cover the whole risk assessment process,¹ active participation methods (for example, workshops, tool box talks), brainstorming for innovative solutions and techniques to support discussions (for example, body and hazard mapping, and taking photos). More passive tools include questionnaires for initial hazard identification or evaluation of implemented solutions and suggestion schemes. Methods and tools can be combined in various ways and adapted to the needs and context of the workplace.

A note on the law

In the EU, all employers must consult workers and/or their representatives and allow them to take part in discussions on all questions relating to safety and health at work in a balanced way. National laws and/or practices set specific requirements on information provision and consultation.

Examples of participatory actions

- **A PVC factory** involved workers in developing and testing trolleys to reduce MSD risk from heavy manual handling. It involved collaborative work teams, and different options for adaptations to equipment were considered, tried and adjusted in a gradual process. The management used the successful experience to continue with more worker participation activities.
- **Kitchen work** was analysed using a series of participatory workshops. The workers used visits to other kitchens to find inspiration for identifying MSD risks and possible improvements.



Checklist for worker participation in MSD prevention

This checklist² covers the policies and practices needed for effective worker participation in MSD prevention and specific actions to ensure worker participation at each step of risk prevention for a specific intervention. In workplaces with worker safety representatives, both the representatives and the workers who do the job should be involved. They are different avenues to be combined as effectively as possible.

1. Policies and practices for MSD prevention and worker participation

- **Commitment** to: preventing MSDs; providing resources (time and budget) for any changes needed; open discussion; involving women and men – differences in size and strength need to be taken into account, which needs to be taken into account for workstation and tool design.
- **Procedures for reporting** MSD symptoms and risk factors – workers encouraged to report concerns as soon as possible.
- **Procedures and forums for regularly discussing** occupational safety and health (OSH) with workers and getting their feedback – workers encouraged to suggest ways to reduce MSD risk factors, improve ways of working and getting involved in planning and implementing changes, including considering OSH/MSDs.
- **Managers and workers trained** to recognise MSD symptoms, MSD risk factors and possible improvements, and how to report problems and propose solutions. Basic training on MSD risk assessment for workers will allow them to actively take part in risk assessment.

¹ https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Carrying_out_participatory_ergonomics

² Adapted from checklists in: Occupational Health and Safety Council of Ontario, MSD Prevention Series

2. Participation in MSD hazard spotting and risk assessment

- To help identify hazards: **ask workers** if they feel pain or discomfort related to work tasks – can they identify which tasks? Then ask about the work environment and work organisation.
- If a steering group, working group, ambassadors and so on are being used for a specific intervention, is **additional training** given to them on the role of the group and those involved, on ergonomics and so on?
- While conducting an MSD risk assessment: **discuss** with workers identified hazards and work activities and demands linked to the hazards. Do they agree that these risk factors and activities are contributing to MSDs, and why? Provide workers with checklists of risk factors to consider.
- **Workers are actively involved when any risk assessment methods or worker observations are used.** The outcomes are compared with workers' comments and discussed with them.
- If external expertise is used, **experts are instructed** to actively involve workers.

3. Prioritisation risk factors to tackle

- **Agree with workers** which MSD issues should be addressed.

4. Choosing and implementing MSD risk prevention measures

- **Brainstorm ideas and options** with workers for MSD prevention measures. Brainstorm as many ideas as possible, so as not to overlook a less obvious option. Using guidelines on MSD prevention measures can help the brainstorming.
- Involve **workers directly affected**, supervisors, maintenance, safety personnel and so on.

- Involve any **other workers whose work may also be affected by changes**, for example workers in other areas of a production line process.
- **Involve workers in reviewing and deciding which solutions to select** for implementation, taking sufficient time. Together with the workers, decide what can be implemented immediately and in the medium and long term, setting out an action plan for implementation.
- **Involve workers in any piloting** of MSD prevention measures.
- **Train workers and supervisors** in the use of the new measures.

5. Monitoring and evaluating solutions

- **Check whether workers are using new measures.** If not, ask why, look for barriers to use, not seek to blame.
- **Immediately after making changes, ask workers whether they think the new measure is working** – less pain, easy to use, not causing any unforeseen problems in production or additional hazards.
- **Evaluate again after a period of time, asking workers for their opinion and feedback.** Are measures still effective? Any further suggestions for prevention? What have been the costs versus the benefits of the change?
- **Inform all workers about the success** of new measures and acknowledge the contribution of those workers involved in this process.
- **Continue to encourage workers** in proposing further MSD prevention measures.



The basics for small businesses

Small businesses have fewer resources than larger organisations. However, one advantage is that of closer social relationships between owner(s)-manager(s) and workers who work and interact on a daily basis. By building on such close social interactions and holding relatively simple discussions or workshops, the process of involving workers may not be so complicated. Micro and small enterprises should:

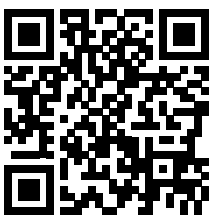
- **listen to workers'** concerns related to MSDs;
- **organise meetings** to identify problems and generate solutions;
- **identify** the most important suggestions;
- **allocate responsibility** for implementation;
- **test** and refine solutions;
- **embed changes in daily operations** and check that they are applied in practice;
- **seek external advice** when necessary; and
- **keep workers fully informed and involved** at all stages through daily contact and other communication means.

Resources

- Worker participation in the prevention of musculoskeletal risks at work:
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/worker-participation-prevention-musculoskeletal-risks-work>
- OSHwiki article, Carrying out participatory ergonomics:
https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Carrying_out_participatory_ergonomics
- Worker participation in occupational safety and health – a practical guide:
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/worker-participation-occupational-safety-and-health-practical-guide/view>
- Body and hazard mapping in the prevention of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs):
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/body-and-hazard-mapping-prevention-musculoskeletal-disorders-msds/view>
- Conversation starters for workplace discussions about musculoskeletal disorders :
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/conversation-starters-workplace-discussions-about-musculoskeletal-disorders/view>

Useful sources of advice and further information

- International Labour Organization, Barefoot research: *A Worker's Manual for Organising On Work Security*
<https://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/ses/info/publ/2barefoot.htm>
- International Labour Organization, Ergonomic Checkpoints
https://www.ilo.org/safework/info/instr/WCMS_178593/lang--en/index.htm
- Occupational Health and Safety Council of Ontario, MSD Prevention Series
<https://www.iwh.on.ca/publications/msd-prevention-series>



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