

How do I support workers who report a musculoskeletal disorder?

OHS information for employers and supervisors

KEY INFORMATION

- As an employer, you have responsibilities under both the *Workers' Compensation Act* and occupational health and safety legislation when a worker is injured.
- Meeting these responsibilities and being engaged in the recovery process helps workers safely return to their usual work activities and can reduce claims costs.

This bulletin provides information on steps to take when a worker reports an injury to muscles, ligaments, bones, tendons or nerves. These are also known as musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) or musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs). This bulletin does not include other steps needed for more serious injury events that require first aid or transport to a medical treatment facility.

Employers have specific obligations under *Workers' Compensation Act* and occupational health and safety (OHS) laws in these cases. Also following best practices can maintain positive relations and support earlier return to work.

Listen and recommend medical assistance

It is important for employers and supervisors to listen and take seriously reports of pain. MSD pain may present as swelling, redness of a body area, reduced range of motion, tingling, numbness, burning sensation, or tenderness to the touch. Reporting pain can be the first sign that the worker has been exposed to MSD hazards. Take the time to listen to worker pain reports or concerns about work tasks.

Suggest that the worker seek medical attention to address symptoms. You may provide workers a [WCB-Alberta worker handbook](#) that gives information on the claims process.

Investigate and document

You are required to investigate the worker's job for hazards related to their concerns once reported, and that of other workers doing similar tasks.



If multiple workers show similar patterns of pain doing comparable work, it increases the likelihood that a MSD hazard is present. This does not mean a single worker's report can be ignored.

If work-related causes of MSDs are identified, you must take corrective measures to avoid further injuries to workers.

Report to WCB

You are required to report any work-related injury or illness to WCB-Alberta within 72 hours of being notified of it. An injury or disease may be covered by workers' compensation benefits if it arises from and occurs in the course of employment. MSDs can be considered work-related and need to be reported.

Consult with others

The health and safety committee (HSC) or health and safety representative (HS representative) are your partners and resources. Among their duties, HSCs and HS representatives make recommendation to the employer respecting the health and safety of workers. Remember that HSC co-chairs or HS representatives may participate in the investigation of any incident that injures a person, or that had the potential to cause a serious injury.

Support the process

Support the recovery process by working with the worker, their health care provider(s) and WCB-Alberta to support recovery and return to work activities. Employers and workers both have the legal obligation to participate in WCB processes.



Research has shown that during the recovery process, supportive supervisor behaviour is critical to prevent any increased disability arising from an MSD. Support in the form of empathy is of particular importance.

Supervisor flexibility

As an employer, it can be helpful to give supervisors flexibility in determining accommodations for a worker with MSD symptoms during the recovery period. This flexibility can improve the success of resuming usual work activities.

Flexibility could involve giving the authority to modify work such as shortening work hours, modifying duties, changing equipment, relocating staff, adjusting schedules, authorizing accommodation-related expenses or facilitating access to medical resources.

Modified work is a way of adjusting your worker's job so they can recover at the same time considering the health, safety and welfare of your worker. As an employer, you may benefit from providing modified work by:

- retaining an experienced worker and reducing any additional hiring or training costs,
- decreasing your worker's time away from work and reducing costs associated with claims,
- strengthening worker relations by showing an injury doesn't threaten job security, and
- boosting worker morale.

Involve workers in the conversation

Involve the injured worker in conversations about plans for accommodations such as modified work or restrictions as part of the recovery process. It makes sense to get the perspectives from the injured worker about return to work activities or any modified duties. This can support a cooperative relationship, decrease the worker's time away from work, and reduce costs associated with claims by addressing any concerns upfront.



About the OHS Prevention Initiative

The [OHS Prevention Initiative](#) is a partnership between the Alberta government, employers, workers, health and safety associations, labour organizations, service providers (consultants, trainers and auditors) and WCB-Alberta. Its aim is preventing workplace injury and illness.

Contributors to this resource

Alberta Food Processors Association
 Alberta Forest Products Association
 Alberta Municipal Health and Safety Association
 Bird Construction Company Ltd.
 Energy Safety Canada
 EWI Works International Ltd.
 Health Sciences Association of Alberta
 United Nurses of Alberta
 Western Wood Truss Association of Alberta
 Workers' Compensation Board of Alberta

For more information – employers

WCB-Alberta – Employer fact sheet
wcb.ab.ca/assets/pdfs/employers/EFS_My_worker_is_injured.pdf

WCB-Alberta – Employer handbook
wcb.ab.ca/assets/pdfs/employers/employer_handbook.pdf

WCB-Alberta – Employer injury report
wcb.ab.ca/claims/report-an-injury/for-employers.html

Other resources

WCB-Alberta – Worker handbook
wcb.ab.ca/assets/pdfs/workers/worker_handbook.pdf

WCB-Alberta – Forms and guides
wcb.ab.ca/resources/for-employers/forms-and-guides/

Government of Alberta OHS resource portal
ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/

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