

Worker deconditioning following an absence from the workplace

OHS information for employers and workers

When employers and workers return to work after a period of time away, such as a temporary shutdown, deconditioning may be a factor. The information in this bulletin can help workers avoid injuries and help employers plan return-to-work and worker reintegration efforts.

KEY INFORMATION

- Deconditioning is a loss of fitness or ability resulting from a lack of activity, which can increase the chance of injury.
- Deconditioning can be prevented and reversed.

Deconditioning and why it matters

Due to seasonal work, shutdowns, or other situations, workers might be absent from the workplace or might not perform their normal work activities for some time. When this occurs, they are at risk of deconditioning.

Deconditioning refers to a loss of fitness or ability as a result of inactivity. Signs of deconditioning can include reduced endurance, increased fatigue, or reduced range of movement in joints. Research has shown that body changes such as reduced muscle mass and lung capacity can occur even within just two days of inactivity.

Deconditioning can cause musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs), also known as musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), that are injuries and disorders of muscles, tendons, ligaments, bones and nerves. Common areas that can be affected include the lower back, shoulders, wrists, and hands. MSIs/MSDs often occur when someone does more than their body is used to, as is sometimes the case due to deconditioning.

Deconditioning can be prevented and reversed through exercise and regular activity. Workers who return to work sites may need to take additional steps to limit the risk of MSIs/MSDs, such as stretching, getting adequate sleep, and being active to recondition themselves.

Avoiding injuries

Before resuming work after an absence from the workplace:

- **Focus and pay attention to your body.** Are there areas that feel stiff and sore from inactivity or as a result of not doing your usual tasks? Are there things you can do that can help those areas feel better?
- **Warm up.** Just like starting a car in winter, your body benefits from warming up and getting blood flowing. A gradual buildup from gentle activities to moderate activities (e.g. from walking to climbing some stairs) can get your body warm and ready for activity.

At the work site:

- **Assess hazards.** Employers must identify existing and potential hazards before work begins, and implement measures to eliminate or control all the hazards. It is important to revisit workplace hazards since being off the work site. Has anything changed? Is there a need for reorientation or updated training?
- **Plan your work.** Can any of the tasks be eliminated? Can equipment be used to lessen any physical loads? Can any lifting, carrying activities be added gradually?
- **Communicate.** Talk about changes in processes or the work environment and what needs to be done to ensure health and safety. Ensure workers know the hazards and follow the controls.

Contact us

OHS Contact Centre

Anywhere in Alberta

- 1-866-415-8690

Edmonton and surrounding area

- 780-415-8690

Deaf or hard of hearing (TTY)

- 1-800-232-7215 (Alberta)

- 780-427-9999 (Edmonton)

Notify OHS of health and safety concerns

alberta.ca/file-complaint-online.aspx

Call the OHS Contact Centre if you have concerns that involve immediate danger to a person on a work site.

Report a workplace incident to OHS

alberta.ca/ohs-complaints-incidents.aspx

Website

alberta.ca/ohs

Get copies of the OHS Act, Regulation and Code

Alberta Queen's Printer

qp.gov.ab.ca

OHS

alberta.ca/ohs-act-regulation-code.aspx

For more information

Ergonomics in the workplace: Identifying and controlling MSI hazards (ERG045)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/erg045

Hazard assessment and control: A handbook for Alberta employers and workers (BP018)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/bp018

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