

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA)

Working with chronic MSDs: what interventions are the most effective?

- Working with chronic musculoskeletal disorders: Good practice advice
- Analysis of case studies on working with chronic musculoskeletal disorders
- OSH WIKI Working with rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs)
[https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Working_with_rheumatic_and_musculoskeletal_diseases_\(RMDs\)](https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Working_with_rheumatic_and_musculoskeletal_diseases_(RMDs))

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What are chronic musculoskeletal diseases?

- There is a wide variety of problems that affect the musculoskeletal system: bones, joints, muscles, tendons and the tissues that connect them. Some of these are longterm – chronic musculoskeletal diseases, also called rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases (RMDs)
- They are associated with pain and impaired physical function
- Affect 1 in 5 adults and more common as people get older



Causes

Inflammatory diseases, ageing, congenital or developmental, trauma, injuries (sports, occupational).

Sometimes the causes are unclear and the pain is just described

Risks

Obesity, smoking and excess of alcohol.

Lack of physical activity, biomechanical factors.

Impacts on individuals



Pain but not visible



The person is frustrated because of **disbelief** by those around them



Difficulty to do some physical activities



Often **stiffness**



Sleep can be disturbed, becoming **tired** and **fatigued**



Stress, anxiety or **depression** make it harder to ignore the pain



Fearful about the **future**: Will it get worse? Will I lose the job?

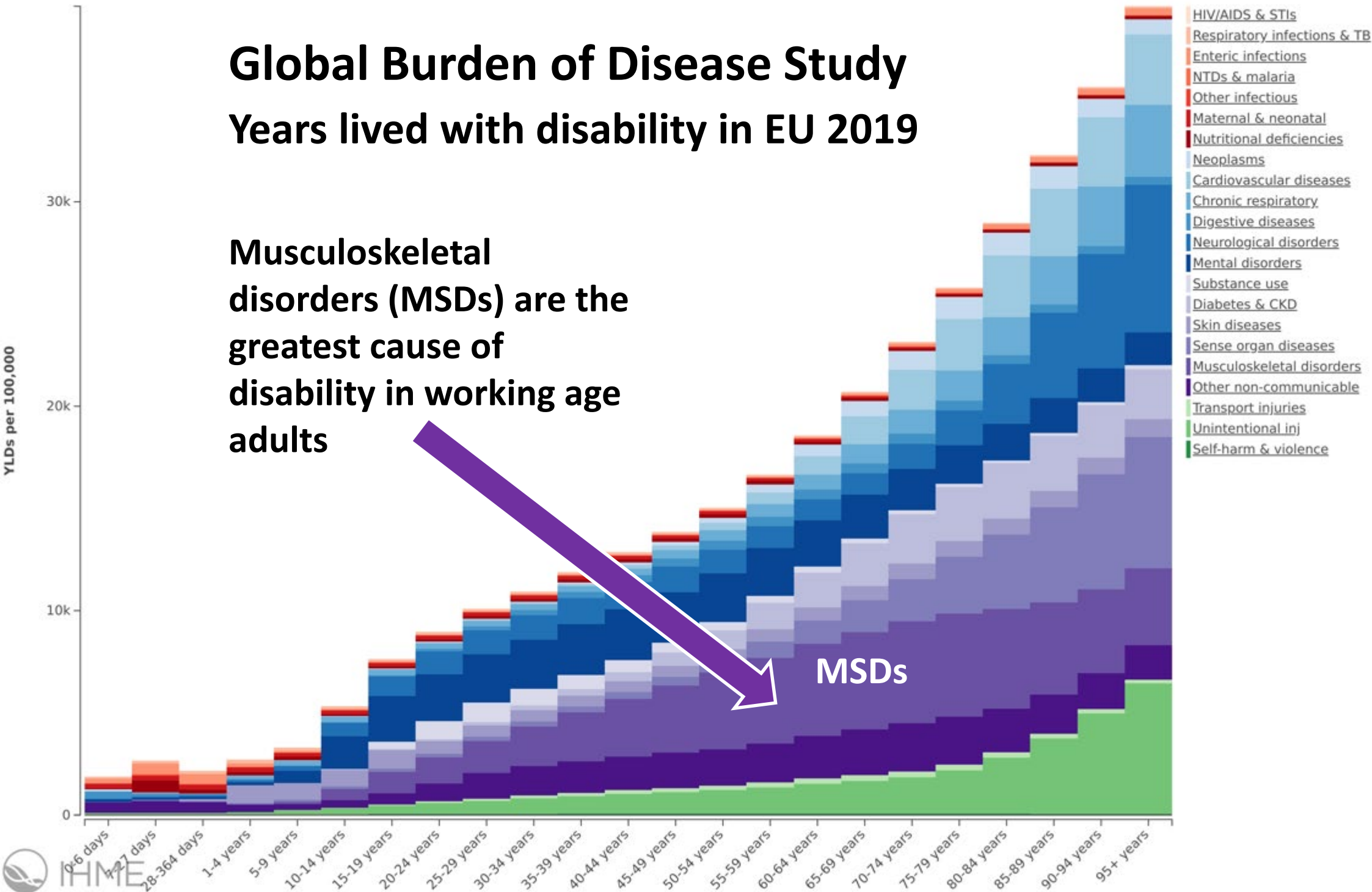


They can **limit** everyday chores, work and leisure activities

Global Burden of Disease Study

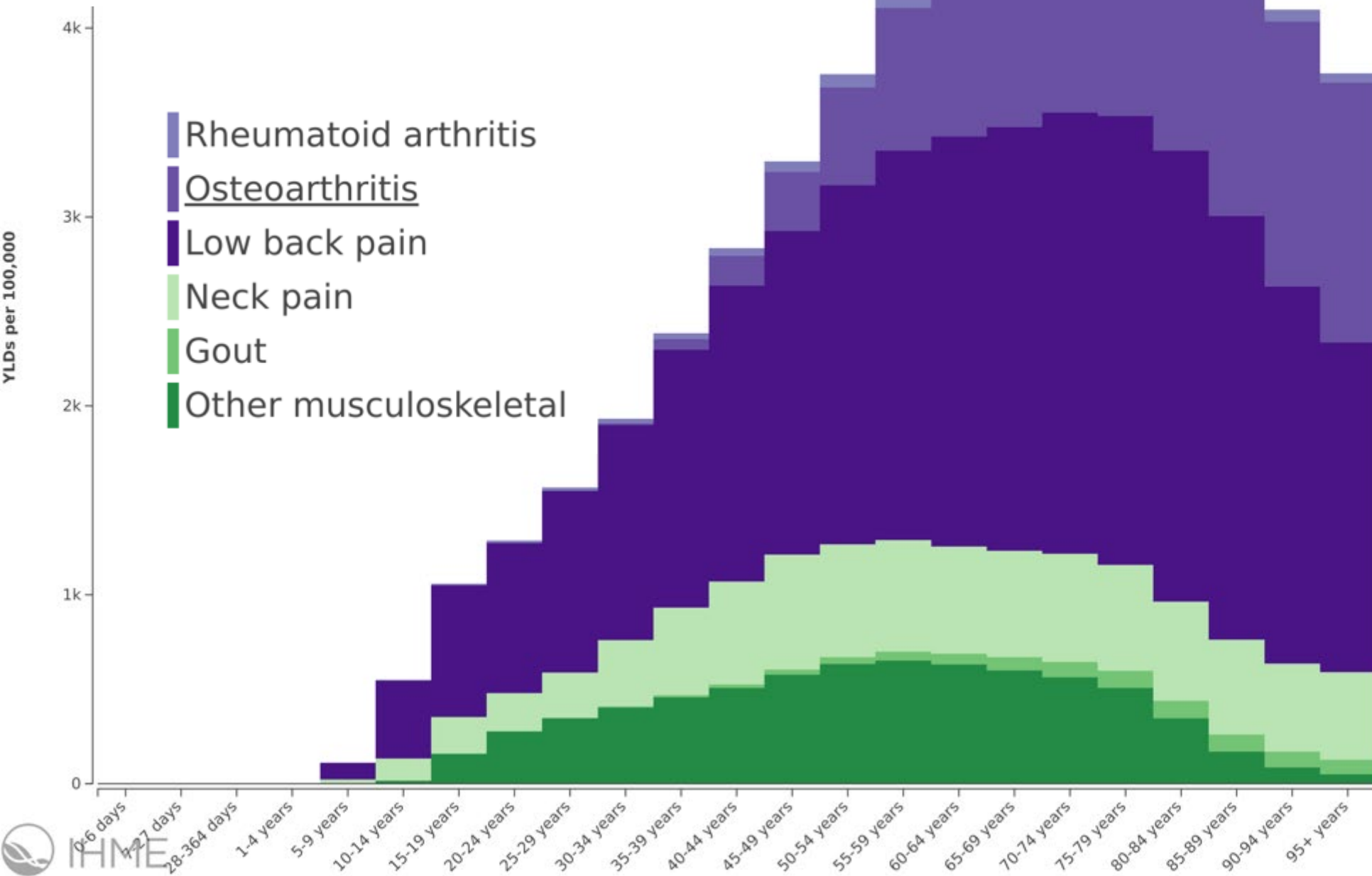
Years lived with disability in EU 2019

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are the greatest cause of disability in working age adults



Global Burden of Disease Study

Years lived with disability in EU 2019



How do chronic MSDs affect people's ability to work?

- Most of the tasks (home, work and leisure) need us to be able to move in comfort. Work activities may worsen their pain.
 - MSDs a major cause of work loss
 - People with chronic MSDs learn to self manage their problems - whether at home or at work.
 - Many do not disclose their MSD condition to their employer - they find their own ways of doing tasks and remaining in work but often less productive.
 - However, if they do not disclose their problems to employers, they can miss out on access to support and workplace adjustments.
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How to enable people with chronic MSDs remain in the labour market?

- People with chronic MSDs need to be enabled to help themselves and minimise, manage and work around their problems.

This needs a workplace that:

- protects musculoskeletal health
 - encourages early intervention for any musculoskeletal problem
 - makes reasonable adjustments to enable people to work despite their musculoskeletal
 - accommodates effective rehabilitation and return to work plans
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How can musculoskeletal health be protected and promoted

- Avoid harmful or damaging habits.
- Avoid risks where possible and follow safe practices.
- Avoid prolonged static postures, sedentary behaviour or repetitive movements.
- Keep physically active, maintain an ideal weight, have a balanced diet and avoid smoking or excess alcohol
- Work processes need to minimize these risks and recognize that employees with musculoskeletal conditions may be more susceptible



How can people who have an MSD be helped

Early intervention

- The sooner a musculoskeletal problem is managed, the less likely it is to become a long-term problem and result in long-term work loss.
- Early access to professional support should be encouraged and enabled (e.g. access to occupational health, physiotherapy)
- This means enabling and encouraging employees to talk to their employers about a musculoskeletal problem as soon as it arises or causes difficulties, not suffering in silence. and employers acting on the outcome of that conversation.



How can people who have an MSD be helped

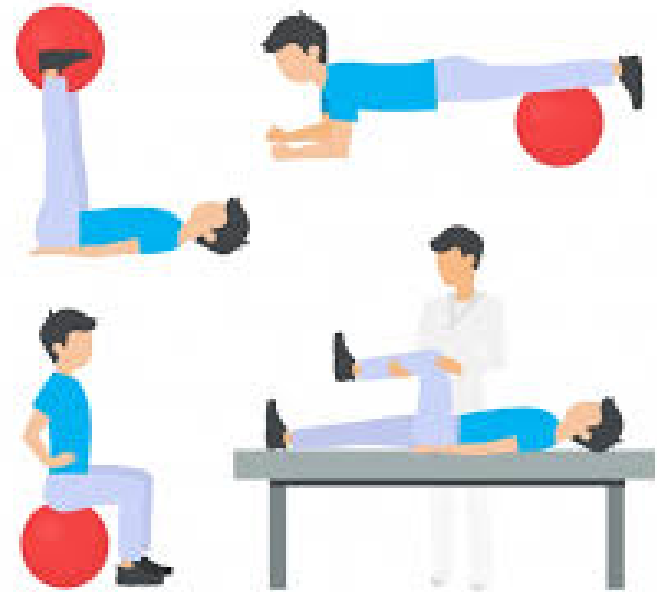
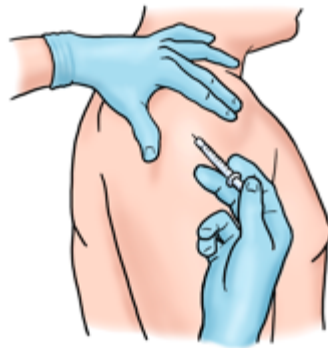
Open and positive culture

- An open culture needs to be led from the top, with a clear signal from senior management that the organisation cares about the wellbeing of all employees, at all levels.
 - An open culture enables the early identification of problems and will also identify risks in the workplace.
 - **What** problems and difficulties the employee has
 - In **which tasks** they need some help
 - What useful **support** would help them to do their job
 - Fear of disclosure may prevent this and occupational health services have an important role.
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How can people who have a musculoskeletal condition (MSD) be helped?

Access to expert advice

- A musculoskeletal condition that is affecting work should be **managed as soon as possible** to reduce the impact on the person, and they should seek medical advice from occupational health services or other healthcare providers.
- There are effective treatments for many musculoskeletal conditions.



How can people who have a musculoskeletal condition (MSD) be helped?

Adjustments in the workplace

- Most employees with an MSD are able to continue in work.
 - **Good communication** will help to clarify their needs and **identify solutions** that can be effective in enabling them to work.
 - **Simple workplace measures** can often be enough to enable the employee to continue in work (e.g. task rotation, reduced hours, support from colleague).
 - This may need to be **supported by medical and ergonomic advice**.
 - Employees don't want to keep saying they cannot do something - line managers and co-workers need to understand and pre-empt difficulties
 - This becomes more important with a longterm problem
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How can people with a longterm MSD be helped?

Changes to job duties and tasks

- Flexibility in practices, roles and responsibilities
- Variability in tasks
- Swapping certain tasks with colleagues
- Ensuring good ergonomics in all tasks
- Reducing or avoiding activities which are difficult or worsen symptoms
- Controlling pace of work

Working patterns

- Faltering work patterns/hours
- Able to take breaks
- Flexibility in working hours
- Working from home

Equipment and workplace adaptation

- Providing ergonomically designed or special equipment
- Using equipment or technology that could make the tasks easier

Support

- From occupational health services
- Allowing time off to attend medical appointments
- Help with travel to and from work
- Opportunities to plan future career or make career changes

The employee must be reassessed as conditions change and can make new aspects of working life difficult.

Providing individual support to enable staying at work

- Requires a **joined-up approach** that involves the employee, their healthcare team, and their line manager with the common goal of helping them to stay at work, working within their abilities. The employee's needs will become clearer through **good communication**.
- The healthcare team with occupational health expertise and ergonomic support needs to give advice on what tasks are appropriate for the employee and what should be avoided.
- Employees should be signposted **to knowledge and support** that will enable them to manage their conditions and stay in work – benefit entitlement, self management. Much information is provided by patient organisations.



Factors that contribute to success from case studies

- Employees wanting to continue working and feeling valued
 - Support from colleagues and line managers
 - An open communication culture, and able to raise problems
 - A joined up approach involving healthcare providers, employers and the worker
 - Access to flexible working hours and teleworking
 - The worker having personal agency to search for information on their health condition.
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- Long absences from work or early retirement are typically caused by a lack of support at work, insufficient support from healthcare providers and individuals health beliefs and expectations
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Train managers and employees to understand musculoskeletal health

Training

- to enable employees to do their jobs in a safe and sustainable way, minimising risks to their health and to know how to look after their musculoskeletal health.

Managers need to

- be aware of and understand the importance of musculoskeletal health,
- be aware of the risk factors for musculoskeletal problems,
- know how to communicate with and support employees,
- know what support is available if someone has a problem,
- know their health and safety responsibilities and understand how to implement health and safety protocols and risk assessment tools.



Overall conclusions

Chronic MSDs are among the main causes of disability, impairments and work loss with additional psychosocial and economic detrimental effects.

Good practice in managing chronic MSDs should include:

- Early intervention
- Access to support mechanisms including occupational health and rehabilitation
- Good communication between the worker and the organisation
- Flexibility in the timing of work and the journey to work
- Ensuring good ergonomics practice is in place in the organisation

Among the simplest and most efficient solutions is the establishment of good employee-employer relationship based on good communication

Thank you

