

SHOP WORKER WITH CHONDROMALACIA ASSISTED BY SIMPLE ACCOMMODATIONS AND SUPPORTIVE COLLEAGUES

Sector: Retail

Job: Shop assistant

Size: Medium-sized enterprise

Country: Greece

Health problem: Chondromalacia

Context/background

The company has several shops in one city that sell books and toys. Each shop has its own group of managers who plan and arrange workers' shifts. The shops are open from 09.00 to 21.00, 6 days a week, and staff are able to work full-time (an 8-hour working day) or part-time (a 4-hour working day), in line with national opening hours for urban shops. Workers in the same shop who carry out the same roles and tasks are able to exchange shifts. There is a policy whereby workers are able to change working hours from full-time to part-time whenever they need to, providing this is agreed and arranged with the manager.

Demographic and health information

The case is that of a female shop worker who is 48 years old. She has had chondromalacia in her wrist and knee joints for 2 years and is receiving medical treatment and physiotherapy for it. Chondromalacia is a general term meaning abnormal softening or deterioration of cartilage. The process of deterioration continues and worsens, but, with proper treatment, this process can be delayed or stabilised. The main symptoms include pain and swelling of the affected joints. The worker's chondromalacia in her knee is grade IV, which means that the damage is already advanced and the bone is unprotected by cartilage tissue. In addition to the chondromalacia, the worker is also experiencing hypothyroid problems, although these do not particularly affect her work.

The worker has received both medical treatment and physiotherapy for the chondromalacia. The worker has not taken sick leave from her job, despite her being eligible to do so.

The main problem with chondromalacia is that it can progress and permanently damage the joints. Repetitive movements or movements that involve flexion can cause more damage to the affected joints; therefore, depending on the location of the affected joints, some tasks should be modified. Prolonged standing and static positions are not recommended for the worker, and intense manual work is not good for the wrists and knees.

According to her doctors, the condition can be stabilised, and the painful symptoms can be alleviated with medication and appropriate physical exercises.

Work, job and tasks

The female worker currently works full-time (8-hour shifts) and has worked with the same organisation for 17 years. Her main tasks are providing customer support while selling items in the shop, contacting suppliers and arranging deliveries for the shop. During her working day, she is mainly standing, and she has a 30-minute lunch break and one coffee break.

One of her duties is to understand the costs of goods in the sector. For example, she must make decisions about the procurement of new items on the basis of her experience, and therefore she is required to assist with deliveries. Some tasks involve prolonged standing and carrying heavy items. During large deliveries to the store, staff are responsible for carrying items into the shop or storing them in storage areas.

Process for retention at work

The worker has stayed at work and has been able to continue working full-time in the same job. She has never wanted to give up her job. While the organisation has not implemented a flexible shift system and the participant has to work her timetabled shifts, there is the opportunity to exchange shifts with colleagues and she finds this helpful. Currently, the worker works the afternoon shift, as she prefers it; this means working 5 days a week for 8 hours per day from 13.00 to 21.00. This enables her to complete her physical exercises and attend physiotherapy appointments in the morning. This change to working afternoons was agreed with her colleagues. When her shift is on a Saturday, she works from 09.00 to 17.00.

Support given and by whom

The worker's general practitioner advised that she should not carry heavy items, particularly when feeling pain in her joints. The worker discussed the problem that she has with carrying heavy items with her colleagues and the impact it could have on her chronic musculoskeletal disorder (MSD). This resulted in an offer from all her colleagues to help when large deliveries arrive.

A stool is available to sit on in the shop, and the worker is allowed to use it when there are no customers inside. She has been given access to the owner's restroom should she feel the need to rest.

Workplace changes

Tools and equipment

No additional tools and equipment were provided for lifting and handling; however, the worker can ask colleagues for assistance when moving heavy items. It is unclear if lifting aids are available to workers. A stool is always in the shop and can be used by the worker when there are no customers inside.

Workplace

. An existing restroom for the employer and the manager can also be used by this worker.

Tasks

While the worker is still able to continue with her work tasks, she is not obliged to perform tasks that involve lifting or carrying heavy items. Her main activities now involve light physical work inside the shop — as she is frequently changing departments, from books to toys — and carrying out customer service duties.

Work travel

The worker commutes to and from work using the bus. At the moment, she does not have any problems with using this method of transport. By working the afternoon shift, she is able to avoid busy periods such as rush hour.

Working time

The worker has changed to working the afternoon shift, which has been made possible by the employer. She is also able to exchange shifts with other workers should she need to attend a physiotherapy appointment. The opportunity to exchange shifts is available to all staff and helps the worker to continue to work. Health and safety risks identified

There appears to be a number of manual handling risks associated with the work tasks, but at the present time these have not been assessed. However, the use of handling aids would benefit everyone in the workplace, not just the worker who is the focus of this case study.

Ease or difficulty of implementing the advice

Because the worker has been employed by the same organisation for 17 years, she has established a good and open relationship with her employer and colleagues. This has enabled her to stay at work and to ask for help when required. She also finds the physiotherapy exercises quite easy; however, she would like to find more information regarding her MSD.

Transferability

Seeking help with work tasks from colleagues is one aspect of this case that is transferable. This is a small organisation in which an individual receives support from her colleagues when having to handle heavy items. However, it is important to highlight that no worker should be lifting heavy items without appropriate risk assessment, prevention measures and relevant equipment in place. Other factors that could be considered by other businesses include the provision of a stool to rest on during a full working shift.

Lessons learned

The lessons learned from this case include the following:

- Good communication and relationships with the employer and colleagues are important to support continued working.
- Flexibility about shifts can help a lot when a worker has to attend medical appointments, especially where this means that annual leave does not need to be used for appointments.
- Good relationships with colleagues and managers help with good communication and establishing a mature relationship.
- Access to a restroom can be beneficial for taking breaks.

In summary, some important factors in this case include good relationships with colleagues and line managers, as their support can be essential to enable a worker suffering from an MSD to stay at work.

Costs and benefits

The cost of physiotherapy is covered by the national health system, and in this case no other costs were identified. Among the benefits, it is important to underline that the worker has continued to work full-time and does not need any other financial support.

Summary of changes

The worker decided not to take sick leave, mainly because she could work around her medical and physiotherapy appointments by changing shifts. The worker is helped by her colleagues and assisted when necessary to carry heavy items.

• References and resources

Healthline, 'Chondromalacia', <https://www.healthline.com/health/chondromalacia-patella> (accessed 22 November 2019).