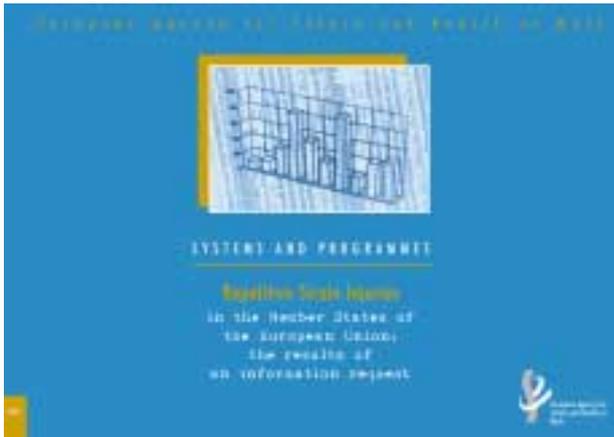




Repetitive Strain Injuries in EU Member States Summary of an Agency report



'Repetitive Strain Injury' or 'RSI' is a commonly used, if not universally agreed, term to cover a range of work-related musculoskeletal disorders. These disorders can affect both upper and lower limbs including the shoulders and neck, the wrist, elbows and knees, and can be caused by work involving awkward postures and movements or of a highly repetitive or fast-paced nature (see Agency report Work-related neck and upper limb musculoskeletal disorders).

This fact sheet highlights the findings of a new European Agency report, *Repetitive Strain Injuries in the Member States of the European Union*, and is based on the results of a survey questionnaire distributed in 1999. It was carried out at the request of the Dutch Ministry for Social Affairs and Employment who wanted to know how different European countries define and measure the 'RSI' problem and the types of policies and actions they have in place to tackle it.

'RSI' – a European perspective

- No common definition for 'RSI' exists across the Member States although all have some kind of terminology at least implicitly relating to these conditions, such as upper limb disorders.
- There is great variation between the Member States on data collection methods and data available on the prevalence of these disorders. However what data there are confirm that they are a significant work place risk
- The occurrence of these disorders is linked to the type of work undertaken, with women often working in occupations that put them more at risk.
- Member States are taking various initiatives aimed at reducing the occurrence of these disorders.

Government policies on 'RSI'

A number of Member States have formulated specific policies and plans aimed at preventing work-related 'RSI'. These initiatives take various forms and include:

- preventative action targeted at specific sectors;
- improving reporting systems;
- financing research or specific studies;
- production of information materials, guidelines etc;
- health monitoring protocols;
- setting action plans and targets to reduce the incidence.

In other Member States it seems that prevention of 'RSI' is part of the overall approach to preventing occupational risks and implementing European legislation. 'RSI' can be considered as part of a larger group of musculoskeletal disorders which includes back injuries from manual handling risks amongst others. This explains why some of the examples provided by Member States also refer to manual handling.

- **Austria:** An examination was undertaken in 1999 to include work-related spinal column injuries and tendon sheath disorders in the official list of occupational diseases.
- **Belgium:** An official task group has been set up to study the problem. The introduction of an information policy for employers and employees is under consideration.
- **Denmark:** Tackling 'RSI' is part of the Ministry's action programme for a clean working environment in 2005. Following a decision of Parliament, social partners have elaborated an action plan aimed at reducing incidence by 50%.
- **France:** Several regions have experimented with changing reporting procedures. The number of reports of 'RSI' increased tenfold in some regions and the quality of the information received improved considerably.
- **Germany:** Programmes to combat musculoskeletal disorders are concentrating on research studies and the transposition and implementation of EU regulations at national level.
- **Greece:** Activity relates to the implementation of health and safety legislation concerning the prevention of musculoskeletal disorders arising from EU Framework Display Screen Equipment and Manual Handling of Loads directives.
- **Ireland:** Plans to specifically tackle the issue in a future work programme.
- **Luxembourg:** Plans for 2000 include two projects in the financial and construction sectors.
- **Netherlands:** A four-year target has been set to reduce 'RSI' complaints among VDU workers by 10 % (or 100,000 cases).
- **Spain:** At State level, a policy has been drawn up which includes legislation, publication of technical manuals and health surveillance protocols. Some Autonomous Communities have launched studies with the aim of improving patterns of work in specific sectors and consequently reducing 'RSI' (e.g. the banana sector on the Canary Islands).

- **Sweden:** Work-related musculoskeletal disorders are one of five prioritised areas in the National Board of Occupational Safety and Health's current three-year plan. Initiatives have included new provisions on ergonomics for the prevention of musculoskeletal disorders, while recently revised provisions for VDU work highlight the issue of monotonous, repetitive work with keyboard and mouse.
- **United Kingdom:** The issue is recognised as a serious problem and action is being pursued under the framework of existing legislation.

Target setting to reduce 'RSI' related complaints

Although not yet a very common approach, some Member States have set quantitative goals aimed at reducing the incidence of 'RSI'. In Denmark an action plan with the social partners aims at halving the amount of repetitive work. Sweden has set a specific target to reduce by 25% the proportion of women who daily lift burdens of 15 kg. The Netherlands want to achieve a 10% reduction in the number of 'RSI' complaints related to VDU work within a four-year period.

Information campaigns on 'RSI' related complaints

The survey identified many examples of information campaigns aimed at preventing 'RSI' related complaints. Some are government-led initiatives run in conjunction with social partners such as employer and trade union organisations. But campaigns are also regularly being organised by other organisations such as trade unions themselves. Campaigns may involve the production and dissemination of information material; running seminars; use of inspectors to raise the issue; selecting a week to run activities. They may be targeted at specific sectors or at specific disorders/risks such as back pain/manual handling. Some examples are given below.

- **Belgium:** The National Action Committee for Safety and Hygiene in the Construction Industry intends to launch an information campaign concerning 'RSI' for construction workers.
- **Denmark:** The social partners have issued 'RSI' guidelines to affected sectors. The Danish Working Environment Authority has also sent information material to the same sectors in connection with its initiatives to reduce 'RSI'. Information meetings have been held at both central level, for working environment professionals, and local level, for employees in industries where 'RSI' occurs.
- **Luxembourg:** A national awareness-raising week was held in 1999.
- **Netherlands:** 1999 saw the launch of a government information campaign aiming at VDU workers and their employers. A CD-ROM and leaflet were distributed among all companies with more than 20 employees in order to make VDU workers aware of the risks and to give information about effective measures against 'RSI'.
- **Portugal:** Awareness-raising campaigns aimed at employees and employers have been launched.
- **Spain:** Information leaflets have been produced on specific subjects, such as load handling, work postures, carpal canal syndrome and display screens.

Initiatives for cooperation or voluntary agreements on 'RSI'

There is evidence of a wide range of initiatives for cooperation or voluntary agreements with social partners, which usually take place at sector level, with social partners actively co-operating.

- **Belgium:** Negotiations are taking place in the construction industry. They may lead to an agreement on workload limitation.
- **Italy:** An agreement was signed regarding health personnel (public sector) within preventative systems in relation to the Framework Directive.
- **Netherlands:** Social partners of high-risk sectors will be approached to discuss the possibilities of a specific voluntary agreement with regard to 'RSI'. The Dutch Scientific Health Council has been asked to reach a scientific consensus concerning the specific work-related factors of 'RSI'.
- **Spain:** At State level, there have been attempts to establish cooperation between the Labour Inspectorate and the trade unions in a number of campaigns on 'RSI' in specific sectors (clothes manufacturing and hypermarket cashiers) but this has not resulted in any concrete action. Some Autonomous Communities have planned to initiate a number of projects in specific sectors.
- **Sweden:** Staff at the National Board for Occupational Safety and Health have for many years been working regularly in branch groups with social partners e.g. for hotels/restaurants and wholesale/retail trade. Work-related musculoskeletal disorders (including 'RSI') are one of the issues tackled in these collaborative groups.

Further reading

The full text of the report in English is available at the Agency's web site at <http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/reports/>.

The printed report Repetitive Strain Injuries in the Member States of the European Union, 32pp, European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2000, ISBN 92-828-8804-5 can be ordered from the EC's Publications Office EUR-OP in Luxembourg (<http://eur-op.eu.int>), or from its sales agents.

Also available, Work-related neck and upper limb musculoskeletal disorders, 116pp, Buckle, P., Devereux J., European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 1999, ISBN 92-828-8174-1, price 7 euros (excluding VAT). Availability as above.

EU information campaign on musculoskeletal disorders

'Turn your back on work-related musculoskeletal disorders' is the theme for the European Week for Safety and Health at Work being run by the 15 European Union Member States in October 2000. The Agency has produced fact sheets and other information products to support the Week. <http://osha.eu.int/ew2000/> is the direct link to European Week information.