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Repetitive Strain Injuries

an ounce of prevention saves a ton of regret

Before the science of ergonomics came along, people accepted that certain tasks always caused pain and discomfort. Sufferers grumbled, then carried on regardless – a sore back, stiff neck, or tennis elbow were thought of as occupational hazards. We know now that many of these can be avoided by giving consideration to the way things are done. Unfortunately, time restraints and the desire for increased efficiency and profitability frequently outweigh the health risks. When doing it the right way means paying out for specialised equipment which, in turn, calls for a new method that might take twice as long, employers will balk at the prospect. Quite a few workers who take a pride in their jobs will also see no need to fix something that isn't really broken. Older, wiser and a few visits to the physio later, they may have second thoughts, having to agree that old habits and complacency have served up medical conditions they are stuck with, perhaps for the rest of their lives.

Strenuous physical activities are the cause of many permanent injuries, even though they come with warnings that we've all heard before. It should go without saying that a straight back, knees bent and use of the leg muscles is the best method for lifting heavy loads – weight-lifters do it all the time; we, however, who aren't athletes, ignore the advice. Maybe we just don't think, and when we do it's about the job in hand and getting it done quickly with no time for elaborate procedures. When a fair amount of effort is required to complete a particular task, the chance of an eventual medical complication as a result is pretty much expected. When it finally happens, we give ourselves a kick in the pants as a reminder that we must now pay the price for past stupidity. Those not engaged in heavy manual labour probably assume they are immune and don't need to worry. The truth is that everyone risks injury by performing tasks that are repeated throughout the day, every day. Jobs like filing, data entry, production-line work in a light industry, even playing video games can result in prolonged suffering and permanent damage if they aren't performed with continuing good health in mind.

Repetitive strain injuries are caused by continually repeating an action over an extended period in exactly the same way; often the wrong way. This results in damage to soft tissue, possible displacement of joints, and skeletal disfigurement. Students carrying unsuitable backpacks loaded with books to and from school each day risk neck, back and shoulder problems. Discomfort of this nature may be shrugged off as unimportant because it is only temporary, but the strain on young bodies that are still growing can result in permanent deformities that will affect them in later life. Parents have to pick up and carry young children throughout the day, every day – they just accept it as part of the job along with the resultant aches and pains. Many of our ageing community walk with a stoop, hardly surprising after years of toting this and lifting that. Despite the examples, we seem to be very slow on the uptake, failing to realise that we would be better off learning from someone else's mistakes to avoid making our own.

As more workers become patients, employers will eventually have to concede that something must be done to improve conditions. Unfortunately, very few seem prepared to implement changes of their own volition. They wait until litigation forces it on them. A replacement employee and some costly alterations later, they can carry on pretty much the same as before. Their former worker, however, is now out of a job and unlikely to get a similar position because their permanent injury makes simple tasks too painful or physically impossible. Then there's the stigma attached to a person who thought it necessary to wrangle for compensation in a court of law. Any future employer wouldn't want to go down the same road and would be reluctant to give that person a chance. The progression from this point isn't good. Unless they can secure some kind of meaningful employment that they are capable of doing without making their condition worse, the sufferers of work-related injuries quickly lose faith in themselves.

The answer is to be found in hindsight. It won't help those who are already victims, but there might be some small compensation for them in the knowledge that others are aware of the problems they now face and are taking steps to avoid the dire consequences of poor work practices. It doesn't require a medical degree to recognise the symptoms. Initially, the discomfort may only be slight – a sore wrist or neck which is merely annoying, but nothing to worry about because it is usually gone by morning. Then one day it is still there, just a hint at first, getting more noticeable as another day wears on. The repetitive strain injury has begun and will continue to worsen unless action is taken to address the cause. Standing at a bench or table for long periods is harder still when the work surface is a little high to perform duties naturally without too much stretching and straining. A simple wooden board or dais to stand on might alleviate the problem – an inch or two can make a big difference. The same applies to those sitting at computers all day. Correct posture and back support are essential, so the chair must be suitable for the individual using it. One would imagine desks are all a uniform height – they aren't, so the chair will need adjusting to ensure an operator's wrists aren't bent at the wrong angle when typing on the keyboard. Using the mouse is a one-hand job and is a frequent cause of RSI; but most of us have two hands. It just takes a little practice to switch from one to the other on a regular basis. Whether the type of work permits this or not, the rules applicable to the keyboard are still valid. If the height of the mouse pad and the angle of the wrist are causing discomfort, even if only mild at first, failing to rectify this can and will cause problems down the track.

The causes and effects of repetitive strain injury are too numerous to mention; but I don't really need to go into them in detail. Every job carries its own risks, some unique, others common across the board; all should be taken seriously. As soon as the kind of discomfort I have described is first noticed, that is the time to do something about it – later might be *too late!* I know some will argue that they have families to support and can't afford to lose a good job by complaining about work conditions and getting the management offside. To these people I say this: what kind of support will you be able to offer when permanent injury and disability prevents you from doing that job, or any other? RSI is a serious ailment that is painful, often lifelong and severely limits a sufferer's mobility, both at work and at home. Physical it may be, but it also has psychological repercussions from a lowering of self-worth to deep depression. Surely, nobody wants any of this?

Be very aware of those nagging little aches and pains that refuse to go away. Try to figure out the cause; or if there seem too many possibilities, focus on those actions that obviously make them worse. Then do something positive to remedy the problem by adopting better work habits. You could find a few simple changes will suffice; then the job which you need to do will be easier, and you'll be able to keep doing it for much longer.

Next issue: Oh My Aching Back – consideration and the right exercises can help

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