



Working with pain

What can workplaces do to support employees with persistent musculoskeletal pain to maintain productive employment?

A RESEARCH PROJECT PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

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Explanatory note: In 2018 Arthritis and Osteoporosis Victoria become Musculoskeletal Australia. For the purposes of this summary, Arthritis and Osteoporosis Victoria will continue to be used.

Background

The aim of this research project was to investigate what kinds of support are needed to assist employees with persistent musculoskeletal pain to maintain productive employment.

Persistent musculoskeletal pain is pain that arises from the muscles, bones, joints and nerves that has lasted more than 3-6 months. It can also be called chronic musculoskeletal pain. Common conditions that affect the muscles, bones and joints and are associated with persistent musculoskeletal pain include: osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, back pain and fibromyalgia. Approximately 6.1 million Australians are affected by these conditionsⁱ.

Economic costs are significant due to loss of productivity, reduced workforce participation, lost income tax and increased government support payments.

In general, work is good for health and those who are unable to work face substantial impacts on their finances, health and mental wellbeing. Those with chronic conditions, including musculoskeletal pain, are less likely than their peers to be able to maintain productive employmentⁱⁱ.

Researchers were interested to find out the most important factors in assisting people to stay in work despite having persistent musculoskeletal pain. The project explored the relationship between the workplace and employee and in particular, the supports needed to encourage productive employment for those with persistent pain.

The project

Fifty working individuals with persistent musculoskeletal pain (34 women and 16 men aged between 26-70 years), were recruited from Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. Of these participants, 35 (21 women and 14 men) undertook semi-structured telephone interviews, which explored a range of issues related to: barriers and enablers to maintaining productive employment, coping strategies, workplace supports and non-workplace supports.

Findings

Organisational factors had a significant impact on working productively; as an enabler as well as a barrier to maintaining employment. Organisational support was critical in maintaining employment, in particular the role of a supportive supervisor and manager who allowed employees to control their work routine (including hours and times of work). A lack of organisational support and strained relationships between participants and co-workers was likely to have negative impacts on employee productivity. Several participants in the study raised the issue of discrimination due to employers' or potential employers' perceptions that employees with persistent pain conditions are a financial liability due to the risk of potential compensation claims.

A range of coping strategies were utilised by participants to help them maintain their productivity at work: changing the nature of their work, taking regular breaks, accessing flexible work hours (changing start or finish times), working

longer when well, enlisting support from colleagues, modifying the work environment and adjusting the work routine.

The provision of flexible working hours and routines was highly valued by participants in assisting them to stay at work. Participants who were able to access ergonomic workstation assessments found them beneficial in identifying changes to assist them whilst at work.

The most effective non-workplace support was an appropriate medication regimen for pain and management of symptoms. Other than pain medication, participants used a range of other non-workplace supports that included exercise/hydrotherapy, support groups and home help (from either family or friends).

Recommendations

A range of recommendations were developed which target organisations, the community and individuals. These include education of employers, access to professional advice, public awareness raising, advocacy and support. These recommendations provide opportunities for A&OV, employers and relevant organisations to implement strategies and practices that will facilitate the productive employment of individuals with persistent musculoskeletal pain.

Find out more

You can access the [full report here](#).

How we can help

Call our MSK Help Line and speak to our nurses. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au.

We can help you find out more about:

- arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- ways to live well with these conditions
- managing your pain
- upcoming webinars, seminars and other events.

ⁱ Arthritis and Osteoporosis Victoria. A problem worth solving. The rising cost of musculoskeletal conditions in Australia. Melbourne: A&OV; 2013.

ⁱⁱ Schofield DJ, Callander EJ, Shrestha RN, Passey ME, Percival R, Kelly SJ. Multiple chronic health conditions and their link with labour force participation and economic status. PloS one 2013;8:e79108.