

VARMA

There are many ways to promote the musculoskeletal health of employees in the workplace

Musculoskeletal diseases account for a significant proportion of sickness absences and disability pensions, and their prevalence increases with age. Therefore, it is important for employers and supervisors to understand and reduce the physical workload factors associated with work. Well-implemented workload management supports the health of the employees' musculoskeletal system and helps to prevent permanent disability.

Musculoskeletal symptoms and work ability

Musculoskeletal symptoms are common. Approximately 40% of employees experience recurring neck and shoulder pain. If prolonged, musculoskeletal symptoms may impair work ability. Nearly one in four sickness allowance periods and approximately one-third of disability pensions are due to musculoskeletal diseases.

Solutions

Identify and reduce the risk factors that increase the physical workload. Use, for example, surveys, work ability data and workplace assessments in identification. Ensure healthy and safe working conditions and practices.

Provide induction into ergonomic working methods and the correct use of tools. Make sure that the personnel have sufficient competence and monitor the implementation of ergonomic practices in everyday work.

Support physical activity and a healthy lifestyle. Strengthen a work culture that promotes physical activity and maintaining muscle fitness. Promote healthy lifestyles and recovery during the workday.

Provide early support. Make sure that your workplace has common procedures for the early detection of musculoskeletal symptoms and the promotion of work ability. Build close cooperation with occupational health care.

Adjust the work so that it is possible to work despite physical limitations. Taking breaks and making work lighter, shortening working hours and job rotation are examples of ways of adjustment.



One in three disability pensions are due to a musculoskeletal disease.

Workplaces need to take action!

27 %

of newly granted disability pensions are due to musculoskeletal disease

50 %

of disability pensions among 55–59-year-olds are due to musculoskeletal diseases

72 %

of rehabilitations due to musculoskeletal diseases succeed

Source: Varma, 2025

🔍 What do we know?

Musculoskeletal symptoms are common and almost everyone experiences them during their life. In addition to pain, the symptoms may include, for example, difficulty moving, restricted movement or stiffness. The symptoms can also impair work efficiency and concentration.

Work-related musculoskeletal symptoms usually develop gradually. Many physical workload factors at work increase the risk of musculoskeletal issues, and the accumulation of several physical workload factors is particularly harmful. A lack of control over work and poor support from the work community can also increase symptoms and expose people to prolonged musculoskeletal symptoms.

🔗 Why is this important?

If prolonged, musculoskeletal symptoms can lead to work disability and cause significant costs for society, workplaces and individuals.

Musculoskeletal diseases become more prevalent with age, which emphasises the importance of preventive measures and early detection.

In order to reduce work disability due to musculoskeletal diseases, active and proactive measures must also be taken at workplaces. Good musculoskeletal risk management supports employees' work ability and speeds up their return to work after sick leave.

Physical workload factors at work

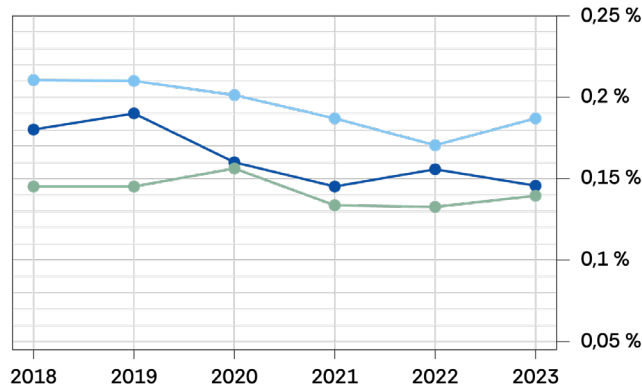
- heavy manual lifting and moving as well as tasks requiring strength
- working while kneeling or squatting
- repetitive, one-sided movements
- awkward or static working postures
- extensive walking or movement
- prolonged standing or sitting

Noise, vibrations, draught and working in cold conditions can also increase the workload.

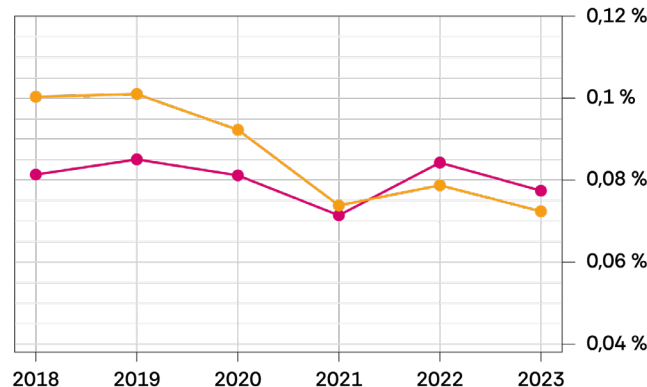
Musculoskeletal diseases are a significant cause of disability

Age-standardised incidence of disability pension 2018–2023

All illnesses



Musculoskeletal diseases



- Musculoskeletal diseases
- Mental health disorders
- Other illnesses

- Upper limb and back
- Lower limb and joint

Source: Varma's data

What should be done?

It is important to identify and reduce excessive physical workload factors at work and to ensure healthy and safe working conditions. Effective solutions include good work ergonomics, early support, work adjustments, close cooperation with occupational health care and support for physical activity and healthy lifestyles. Combining different measures has been proven to be effective – but the most important thing is to get started. Even small actions that support work ability can make a difference!



Evidence-based methods for promoting musculoskeletal health adding breaks to work

- good work ergonomics and guidance in ergonomics
- use of assistive equipment at work
- change of duties and job rotation
- physical exercise and strength training
- stress management
- occupational health care cooperation and early support
- combining different measures

Promoting musculoskeletal health is a joint effort:

Tips for supporting work ability for people in different roles

Management

- Ensure that good working conditions are promoted at all levels of the organisation.
- Make sure that the workload and hazard factors of the work have been identified with regard to physical workload factors as well.
- Eliminate workload factors that are harmful to health or reduce the harm or hazard caused by them.
- Ensure sufficient resources for ergonomics training, assistive equipment needed in work and support for physical activity.
- Develop work and working conditions together with the personnel.
- Monitor the effects of the measures taken on the work ability of the personnel.

HR

- Develop practices that support the musculoskeletal health and work ability of the personnel.
- Provide training in healthy and safe working practices, such as good work ergonomics and lifting techniques.
- Ensure that the personnel have sufficient competence in work ergonomics and the management of physical workload.
- Cooperate with supervisors, employees and occupational health care in managing physical workload.

The employee plays a key role in maintaining their own work ability. It is also important for the employee to inform the supervisor of the workload factors in good time and, if necessary, seek support from occupational health care.

Supervisor

- Identify and manage the physical workload factors of work in your team.
- Ensure that employees are inducted into the work and working conditions.
- Ensure effective work planning, division of work and work arrangements.
- Strengthen work organisation, social support and work management.
- Encourage work breaks and varying working postures and monitor the implementation of work ergonomics.
- Monitor employees' physical workload and take action if problems arise.
- Adjust the work so that it supports working despite physical limitations.
- Refer the employee to occupational health care, if necessary.
- Support the employee's return to work after sickness absence.

How the fact sheet was prepared

The fact sheet is based on Varma's data and studies that have investigated the link between musculoskeletal diseases and disability. Read our other reports on our website (in Finnish) www.varma.fi/tutkimus

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