

Manager/Supervisor Risk Management

#145– 4/22/13

A twice weekly e-mail training for YCPARMIA members

TOPIC: SAFETY – ERGONOMIC RISK FACTORS

There are a number of common factors present in the work environment that can cause ergonomic stress. Since we are dealing with injuries that generally develop over an extended period of time, awareness of these risk factors can help a supervisor identify potential problems, and address them before an injury occurs.

Generally, the factors we are talking about include repetitive motions, sustained or uncomfortable positions, forceful exertions, or vibrations. When a worker complains of a “musculoskeletal disorder” (usually pain, but including weakness, tingling, cramping, stiffness, tenderness, or burning), and cannot point to a specific accident that triggered the symptoms, someone should take a close look at the employee’s working conditions. Those conditions (risk factors) include:

- Repetitive motions: doing the same thing over and over (these days often on a computer);
- Fixed or uncomfortable positions: bending, sitting, kneeling, reaching, lifting;
- Equipment or tools that vibrate;
- Improper seating, including lack of adjustable chairs;
- Poorly designed workstations;
- Bad body mechanics; or
- Lifting and lowering heavy items.

The employer can address or control these factors with:

- Engineering controls: redesigning work stations or tool designs;
- Administrative controls: job rotations, breaks, or process adjustments;
- Work practice controls: training, conditionings, modifications, and refined techniques.

It is common sense: the earlier the risk factors are addressed, the cheaper the solutions.

As indicated above, it is important to recognize that these injuries develop over a period of time. The injured worker commonly ignores or downplays the symptoms of the developing injury. The supervisor is probably unaware (or untrained to recognize) that a problem is developing. Human resources, risk management, and upper management, operating at a distance, have no involvement or knowledge until it is too late. When the problem finally manifests itself, and can no longer be ignored, we have moved from loss prevention to damage control. Those damages include the workers’ compensation costs, the diminished or lost work, the cost of new equipment or workstation modifications, and the lost time in dealing with the ongoing injury and ergonomic issues. Lastly, if one worker was injured from exposure to the risk factors that were present, it is not unlikely that other workers, similarly exposed, will not suffer similar symptoms/injuries. So the problems have the potential of compounding.

Note: When requested, YCPARMIA offers training and ergonomic inspections to its members at not cost.

Next Topic: Safety – Noise Control