

# Musculoskeletal Health



Your musculoskeletal system, comprised of your bones and muscles, is what gives you the ability to move your body. Disorders of the musculoskeletal system can be caused by genetics, or they can be the effect of aging, poor diet, lack of exercise, or repeated strain on a certain bone or muscle. While the full range of musculoskeletal disorders includes serious genetic conditions, common and highly preventable repetitive motion injuries (RMI) such as tendonitis and carpal tunnel syndrome account for nearly a third of all workplace injuries and illnesses requiring time away from work.<sup>(1)</sup> These conditions develop when part of the body is required to stretch farther, impact more directly, or otherwise work harder than it is prepared to do. While the immediate damage may be unnoticeable, over time the injury can become debilitating. These types of injuries are also referred to as overuse syndrome, repetitive stress injuries, or cumulative trauma disorder.<sup>(2)</sup>

The most common types of RMI are tendonitis and bursitis. Tendonitis causes pain and swelling where the tendon enters the muscle.<sup>(3)</sup> Bursitis is an inflammation of one of the fluid-filled sacs – bursae – that cushion areas of friction between your tendons and bones. Repetitive movement widens the blood vessels, allowing proteins and extracellular fluid into the bursae, which become swollen and inflamed.<sup>(4)</sup> If you have bursitis, you might have a decreased range of motion in the affected joint, and you might feel a crunching sensation when you move the joint. Fortunately, both tendonitis and bursitis can usually be remedied with proper care.<sup>(3)</sup>

Another common RMI is carpal tunnel syndrome, which occurs when the median nerve, which runs from the forearm into the hand, is compressed at the wrist. The carpal tunnel is a narrow passageway of bones and ligaments at the base of the hand that houses the median nerve and tendons. When this passage is narrowed by swelling from irritated tendons, a sprain or break, fluid retention during pregnancy, or any of a host of other reasons, the median nerve is compressed and causes pain and numbness in the hand, wrist and arm. Carpal tunnel can be prevented in many cases through stretching exercises, frequent rest breaks, and correct posture and wrist position. If you start to notice loss of sensation or tingling, wrist splints can keep your wrists straight to prevent compression of the median nerve.<sup>(5)</sup>

## Preventing RMI on the job

Any sort of job that involves a repetitive motion or requires you to sit or stand in a certain position for a long amount of time can cause stress to your bones and muscles. The discomfort caused by this strain can be prevented or lessened by having adjustable furniture at your workstation. The design of your workstation should keep your body in the most natural positions possible, so you do not have to lean forward or backward any more than necessary. If you can adapt your chair, work surface and/or keyboard to several comfortable positions, the stress will be evenly distributed throughout your musculoskeletal system, instead of straining the same set of bones and muscles all day long.<sup>(5)</sup>

## Resources

For more information about how to reduce strain to your musculoskeletal system, visit the Occupational Safety and Health Administration website at [osha.gov](http://osha.gov). For information about eTools tailored to specific industries and types of workstations, select “Ergonomics” under “Safety/Health Topics.” Follow their diagrams for properly configured workstations for various tasks.



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(1) United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Nonfatal Occupational Injuries and Illnesses Requiring Days Away From Work*, 2008 (November 24, 2009): [bls.gov](http://bls.gov) (2) National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, *NINDS Repetitive Motion Information Page* (February 14, 2007): [ninds.nih.gov](http://ninds.nih.gov) (3) WebMD, *Repetitive Motion Injuries* (August 10, 2005): [emedicinehealth.com](http://emedicinehealth.com) (4) WebMD, *Bursitis* (October 21, 2005): [emedicinehealth.com](http://emedicinehealth.com) (5) National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, *Carpal Tunnel Syndrome Fact Sheet* (February 14, 2007): [ninds.nih.gov](http://ninds.nih.gov)

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