

Repetitive Strain Injury

Guidance for Safety representatives and members on RSI, tenosynovitis and other work-related upper limb disorder



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Do you or your members get pain or swelling in your hands, wrists or shoulders?

Do you feel stiff or have 'pins and needles' by the time you finish work?

These symptoms could be an early signal of repetitive strain injury (RSI).

RSI is a serious disease that must be stopped at an early stage or permanent disability could be caused. Preventing this disease is even better—so read this advice even if you don't suffer from aches and pains at the moment.

What is repetitive strain injury?

RSI covers a wide range of injuries to muscles, tendons and nerves. Usually hands, wrists, elbows or shoulders are affected. Knees and feet can also suffer, especially if your job involves a lot of kneeling or operating foot pedals on equipment.

RSI is the more commonly known term for a set of disorders called work related upper limb disorder or WRULDS.

There are many different names for these injuries—including:

- Tenosynovitis
- Carpel tunnel syndrome
- Tendinitis
- Dupuytren's contracture
- Epicondylitis or 'tennis elbow'
- Bursitis
- 'Housemaid's Knee' or 'Beat conditions'
- Overuse injury
- Work related upper limb disorders (WRULDS).

Unsafe working practices don't save employers money. In the long run staff illness, retraining, lost work and compensation claims for injuries will cost your employers more than prevention. More than 200,000 workers suffer from RSI or WRULDS every year. The number of working days lost through upper limb disorders has doubled since 1989. The number of compensation claims for RSI continues to rise. The TUC estimates that nearly £3 million was won for workers affected by RSI in 1994/1995.

But no amount of money can truly compensate for the pain and disability of RSI. And RSI or WRULDS can be prevented.

What causes RSI?

RSI is caused, or made worse, by work demanding awkward or repeated movements, especially if you need to apply pressure as well. For example, wringing out clothes means twisting your wrists and arms while gripping the cloth tightly. If these movements are repeated frequently, your hands and wrists will be strained and start to feel painful or numb.

Who is at risk?

Anyone whose work involves some of the following risk factors:

- awkward posture
- awkward grip
- badly designed equipment, tools or workstations
- repeated movements
- overwork
- applying physical force
- fast-pace work
- vibration
- inadequate rest breaks
- lack of training
- no variety of tasks.

All these factors are worse in the cold or in stressful working conditions.

It is not just clerical work that causes RSI. Nearly all work carries some risk. It has been linked to manual work, including the use of vibrating equipment. But clerical workers can also have problems caused by typewriters, word processors and computer keyboards.

Groups at risk

UNISON members at risk include:

- cooks
- cleaners
- typists, clerical and data processing workers
- drivers
- carpenters
- machine operators

But many other jobs can cause RSI unless measures are taken to avoid it.

How can RSI be prevented?

The job should fit the worker, not the other way round. The first step is to look at the way jobs are carried out, Does your work include any of the risk factors listed? Use the checklist overleaf to find out what improvements are needed. If the answer to any of these questions is 'yes', there is a risk of repetitive strain injury.

Depending on the problem areas you have identified, the following measures will help to prevent RSI:

- redesign equipment or tools
- change the way the work is done
- redesign work area or work station
- reduce the pace of work
- introduce rest breaks and more variety of tasks
- training to include risks and safer methods of work

See Further information for helpful advice and contacts.

RSI checklist

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1. Does the work involve

- (a) awkward movements of hand, wrist, arm or shoulders?
- (b) rapidly repeated movements?
- (c) prolonged physical pressure, such as gripping or squeezing?
- (d) holding an uncomfortable position for a long time?
- (e) too few breaks to allow muscles to recover?
- (f) lack of variety of physical tasks?
- (g) long hours or fast-paced work?

2. Are tools and equipment

- (a) too heavy?
- (b) the wrong shape to be used comfortably?
- (c) causing problems of vibration or noise?
- (d) designed for men but used by women?

3. Are workstations and work areas

- (a) too high or low?
- (b) not adjustable for individual users?
- (c) Noisy or poorly lit?

4. Is training

- (a) adequate?
- (b) not provided for all employees, especially those who are new to the work?
- (c) not provided when there is a change in equipment or methods of working?
- (d) training does not include risks and ways of avoiding RSI?

5. Are problems

- (a) ignored?
- (b) not reported to management?
- (c) not reported in writing, preferably in the accident book?

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Employers' duties

All employers have legal duties to ensure their employees' health and safety at work, provide safe work methods, workplaces and equipment and give employees health and safety information and training.

Assessing the risks

Health and safety laws mean that managements have a duty to conduct 'risk assessments'. This means that your employer has to work out the risk factors associated with each job then minimise those risks. It is vital that union safety reps are involved, to make sure that:

- risk assessment have been done for all jobs (especially where workers are complaining of WRULDS symptoms)
- all the WRULD risk factors have been examined
- management have consulted the workers concerned
- experienced people have carried out the assessments (they don't need to be experts—they do need experience and knowledge)
- an action plan has been developed to make sure that risks are reduced and monitored (they should be reassessed if the job or work changes).

The legal basis for all this is in the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (1993). More information is given in UNISON's guide to these regulations. You can also find out more information about risk assessments in the TUC Guide to assessing WRULDS risks (see further information) In the case of keyboard work the Display Screen Equipment Regulations are particularly relevant.

What are the symptoms?

People are different—different people will develop WRULDS for different reasons at different times. Symptoms of RSI vary from sufferer to sufferer.

Symptoms include:

- numbness or tingling in the arm or hand
- aches and pains in the muscles or joints
- loss of strength and grip in the hand
- loss of sensation and even whiteness in the finger
- cracking in the joints or muscles.

These symptoms are very similar to aches and pains of everyday life—especially after physical effort. But those aches and pains die away after a day or so. The signs to watch for are the pains which come even when you have not exercised.

There are commonly three stages of injury:

Stage 1: Mild

Pain, aching and tiredness of the wrists, arms, shoulders or neck during work, which improves overnight. This stage may last weeks or months, but is reversible (threatened over-use injury).

Stage 2: Moderate

Recurrent pain, aching and tiredness occur earlier in the working day, persist at night and may disturb sleep. Physical signs may be visible such as a cyst-like swelling near a joint or a tender swelling in the affected area. This stage may last several months.

Stage 3: Severe

Pain, aching, weakness and fatigue are experienced even when the person is resting completely. Sleep is often disturbed, and the sufferer may be unable to carry out even light tasks at home or work. This stage may last for months or years. Sometimes it is irreversible and the person never gets back use of the affected part of their body (established over-use injury).

(from London Hazards Centre Repetitive strain injury.)

Report your symptoms

The first thing you should do is let your employer know about your symptoms, especially if you think they have been caused or made worse by work. If RSI is recognised in the early stages, it can be treated by resting the painful arm or hand etc.

Other measures, such as painkillers, arm-splints, physiotherapy, ultrasound or surgery will not cure the condition if the sufferer is forced to continue the work that caused the problem in the first place. If you think you may be suffering from RSI due to work:

- Tell your Steward/Safety representative, so they can advise you and help you get your workplace changed or pattern of work changed.
- Tell your GP about the work you do, your symptoms and why you think you could have RSI. Don't delay in getting treatment, including sick leave. Follow your doctor's advice and try to stop doing anything they think may be causing your symptoms. (*see below*)
- Report it to your manager and to the occupational doctor or nurse, if there is one. Say what you think has caused

your symptoms. Make sure the symptoms are written in the accident book. If you need help getting access to the book or making a report, your UNISON rep can help.

- Get advice from the Employment Medical Advisory Service (see *Health and Safety Executive in Further information*).
- Prevention is obviously best, but if RSI is confirmed, you may want to see if you can claim benefits and compensation for injury (see below). Do this as soon as possible.
- Report your symptoms quickly, but follow it up in writing, making clear that your work is to blame and keep a copy for future reference.
- Contact the RSI Association for details of your nearest self-help group (see *Further information*).

What do I tell my doctor?

Be careful to describe in detail what work you do, what 'risk factors' you encounter regularly, and where precisely you feel the pain.

If the pain comes on only when you are at work, then let them know—but also tell them if the pain persists long after you would expect your normal aches and pains to have gone away.

If your doctor is unsympathetic, or says it is all in your mind, not to do with your work, or caused by some other factor such as the menopause, you can change doctors (ask your local Community Health Council for details).

But it would be better to persuade them—ask if you could be tested for other causes (such as rheumatism), and if necessary show them this leaflet.

Claiming compensation

Some types of RSI are prescribed industrial diseases. This means that sufferers may be entitled to injury and disability benefit from the DSS. To claim this benefit, ask for Form B1 100B at your nearest social security office.

Types of RSI that are prescribed industrial diseases are:

- tenosynovitis
- writer's cramp
- beat hand, elbow or knee.

Carpel tunnel syndrome—a common type of RSI—is only prescribed if you got it from using vibrating equipment. You may also be entitled to claim benefit for it if you suffer from tenosynovitis as well. At present, only sufferers assessed as at least 14% disabled will be paid DSS disability benefit.

You may also be able to claim compensation for your injuries from your employer. You will need to prove that RSI was caused by work and that your employer should have prevented it.

UNISON can help members if you want to claim compensation. Ask your branch secretary for a UNISON Legal Services Form P1 to apply for legal assistance for work-related cases of injury, illness or disease.

It is not always easy to take compensation cases but, once you have completed the form, UNISON's Legal Services will be able to advise you about whether to go ahead.

Your role as a UNISON safety representative

UNISON has a least two tasks to do:

- get employers to prevent risks
- support members with WRULDS/RSI.

Workers should be encouraged to report their symptoms—and management must be made to deal with the cause of the problem, not take it out on sufferers.

The law requires employers to investigate reported health and safety problems and take steps to prevent them. If they just sack employees without any attempt to rectify the problem or rehabilitate the employee, this is grounds for unfair dismissal.

As a workplace safety rep, you have legal rights to:

- be consulted in good time over any change to working practices or equipment that might affect safety
- be consulted about risk assessments
- be consulted about health and safety information and training for employees
- be consulted about any experts or competent persons appointed to assess WRULDS/RSI problems
- set up a safety committee (make sure any WRULDS/RSI problems are discussed at it)
- time off to represent your work colleagues' safety interests and carry out workplace inspections for WRULDS/RSI
- time off to attend TUC and UNISON health and safety courses.

Further information

UNISON

UNISON produces various information on health and safety. Safety representatives should ask their branch secretary or health and safety officer for copies. UNISON's guide to the six regulations (popularly known as the 'six pack') is available free from:
UNISON Communications
20 Grand Depot Road
London SE18 6SF
(please quote stock number 1660)

TUC

The TUC have published various leaflets and booklets to support their 'Don't Suffer in Silence' WRULDS/RSI campaign. Their materials are available from
TUC Publications,
Congress House
Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3LS
Tel: 0207 636 4030

These include:

- WRULDS campaign pack
- TUC guide to assessing WRULDS risks
- Risks at Work—What could happen to your arm, *free*
- Women and WRULDS, *free*
- Don't suffer in silence! *Campaign posters*
- Stick to your rights—*sticker warning VDU users about the risks and their rights*
- The sufferer's story, Hilary Arksey—*about RSI sufferers' experience with the medical profession.*

Health and Safety Executive

HSE priced and free publications are available from:
HSE Books
PO BOX 1999
Sudbury
Suffolk CO10 6FS

or you can order priced publications through good bookshops.

- Work-related upper limb disorders—a guide to prevention, HS(G)60.
- Seating at Work HS(G)57.
- A pain in your workplace?- ergonomic problems and solutions HS(G)121.
- Upper limb disorders: assessing the risk IND(G)171(L)R1.
- Working with VDUs IND(G)36(L).
- RSI—a trade unionist’s guide

Local Health and Safety Executive offices have Employment Medical Advisors who can advise on RSI and other work related illnesses. To find out where your nearest HSE office is, look under ‘Health and Safety Executive’ in the phone book.

Labour Research Department

78 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8HF

They publish:

- RSI—a trade unionist guide.
- Help for people with RSI

The RSI Association

Provides help and advice for sufferers. Contact them for details of your nearest self-help group. They publish an information pack available from:
380 - 384 Harrow Road
London W9 2HU
Tel: 0207-266 2000
(Monday-Friday, except Thursday 10-5pm)

They also run a helpline Monday, Wednesday, and Friday
Tel: 0800 018 5012

If you are not yet a member of UNISON

The best defence against RSI a worker can have is a strong trade union, with independent safety representatives at the workplace. If you are not already a member of UNISON, join today.

Joining is easy. Just ask the person who gave you this booklet for an application form or send the coupon below to: **UNISON, FREEPOST, 1 Mabledon Place, London WC1H 9AJ.** You don’t even need a stamp

I am interested in joining UNISON

Name Workplace address(if different)

.....

Address for correspondence

.....

..... Postcode

..... Job Title

Postcode Employer