



UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

PREVENTION OF OCCUPATIONAL OVERUSE SYNDROME (OOS) POLICY

OVERVIEW

The University of Tasmania is committed to continuously improving the management and standards of Occupational Health and Safety. This commitment extends to taking all reasonable precautions to protect the health & safety of its employees by identifying and assessing Occupational Overuse Syndrome (OOS) risks and eliminating them from the workplace. The University, will as far as is reasonably practicable, ensure that health and safety implications are the major criterion in the purchase of new equipment, the design of equipment, processes and operations.

DEFINITIONS

Accountable Person:

An individual, who assumes responsibility for the health or welfare of any other person in a workplace by providing instruction, direction, assistance, advice or service, is deemed an Accountable Person in accordance with the *Workplace Health and Safety Regulations 1998*. All management and supervisory staff (which includes those with responsibility for students) are therefore considered "Accountable Persons".

Employee:

For the purposes of this Policy, employee refers to any staff member.

Occupational Overuse Syndrome (OOS):

Occupational Overuse Syndrome, also known as Repetition Strain Injury (RSI) is a collective term for a range of conditions characterised by discomfort or persistent pain in muscles, tendons and other soft tissues, with or without physical manifestations. It is usually associated with tasks which involve:

- repetitive or forceful movement or both; and/or
- maintenance of constrained or awkward positions

Occupational Overuse Syndrome can affect employees from a wide variety of occupations including keyboard operators, musicians, cleaners and maintenance staff.

Responsible Officer:

Deans, Heads of Division, Heads of School and Administrative Sections have been designated as Responsible Officers under the *Workplace Health and Safety Act 1995*.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Accountable Persons:

Ensure these procedures are implemented within their area of responsibility. They must, as part of an employee's induction discuss:

- duties;
- means of adapting the work station to the individual's requirements;
- the importance of discussing and reporting any discomfort or fatigue associated with the work station, and the mechanisms for reporting any such discomfort.

Employees:

Employees must report any early signs of an overuse injury to their supervisor. In some instances employees must be prepared to modify their work practices and environment in accordance with recommendations for corrective actions.

Responsible Officers:

Provide suitable facilities and resources to ensure the effective implementation of this policy.

BACKGROUND

Risk Factors

Some of the known risk factors associated with Occupational Overuse Syndrome are:

- awkward body postures;
- poorly designed workstations, equipment, machinery and tools not matched to the employee, including the effects of vibration and sudden impact forces;
- poorly designed tasks, that is, factors such as employee position, forces required and the design and placement of equipment;
- work organisation factors which may contribute to demands placed on employees, such as required output, duration and variation of tasks, number and duration of pauses and the urgency of deadlines;
- inappropriate/poor arrangement of job design, for example, the requirement to perform the same repetitive movements; and
- new employees, or those returning to work after an extended absence, being required to perform repetitive movements without a period of adjustment.

Other important factors are the control employees have over the performance of their tasks and their level of job satisfaction and involvement.

PROCEDURES FOR PREVENTION

Job Design and Redesign

Job design is an important key to reducing the risk of occupational overuse injuries. The aim of job design is to take into account all the factors which affect the work, and to design and arrange the work content and tasks so that the whole job is without likely risk to the health and safety of the employee.

Where workable, single task, repetitive jobs should be avoided or redesigned to eliminate such repetitive tasks.

Wherever reasonably practicable, jobs should be designed so that they include a mixture of repetitive and non-repetitive work. For example, a word processor's job may be redesigned so that job content is varied to include a number of different tasks that are at the same level of responsibility.

Job rearrangement or redesign should encourage a number of varied activities and postures rather than sitting at one workstation. For example, the new work for the word processor may be placed on a table a distance away from the keyboard workstation, necessitating the employee walking to get the work. The printer also may be located so that the employee has to get up to retrieve work. An important element in job redesign is to not provide similar tasks consecutively.

Duration and Frequency

Similar tasks, repeated over long periods, may fatigue muscles and increase the risk of injury.

How often, and for how long, a task is performed are risk factors to be considered.

Work Rates

Where work rates need to be established, supervisors should consult with the employees concerned to determine realistic and safe work rates.

Employee performance varies between individuals and over time can be influenced by work and equipment factors. In determining safe work rates, some of the factors that need to be considered are:

- physical variations between individuals;
- skills, knowledge and experience of employees;
- type of work and equipment;
- introduction of new work and equipment;
- efficiency of the work process;
- duration of working time; and
- standard of work required.

Peak Demand

Many jobs have predictable peak periods which may result in large variations in job demand. The increased risks generated during these peak periods may be prevented by long term planning of resources and organisation of tasks.

Work Breaks

Where the job requires a sustained period of repetitive or static (holding or restraining) activity, and it is not possible to provide effective task variation, rest breaks should be provided. The exact length and frequency of such breaks will depend on the nature of the tasks which make up the job, however, frequent short breaks are recommended rather than longer less frequent breaks.

Working Hours

Where work involves repetitive or forceful movement or both, and/or maintenance of constrained or awkward postures, supervisors and employees need to be aware of the risk factors associated with extended working hours, such as overtime, 12 hour shifts, short intervals between shifts and split shifts.

Overall organisation of shifts will need to be designed to take into account the potential impact on employees of factors such as fatigue and workload.

Workplace Layout

Wherever a task can be effectively performed from a sitting position, the employer should ensure that seating matched to the individual and task is provided and maintained.

Where the work cannot be performed effectively from a sitting position, but it is possible for employees to sit from time to time while performing the task, the employer should ensure that suitable seats are provided to enable employees to take advantage of these opportunities.

Posture should be varied between sitting and standing positions where possible to reduce the effects of tiredness from maintaining one position for too long.

The most appropriate work positions should be determined by consideration of:

- the tasks that are performed;
- the frequency and duration of tasks;
- the materials, equipment and tools used;
- the individual's ability to adopt a safe body posture.

REFERENCES

This policy and procedure has been developed in reference to:

- *Workplace Health and Safety Act 1995*
- *Workplace Health and Safety Regulations 1998*
- *National Code of Practice for the Prevention of Occupational Overuse Syndrome, 1989.*
- <http://www.wsa.tas.gov.au/topics/rsi.htm>

FURTHER INFORMATION

This Policy should be read in conjunction with the Guidelines for the Use of Screen Based Equipment and the Checklist for Users of Screen Based Equipment.

Additional information and assistance is available from the Occupational Health & Safety Unit on 6324 3275.

Approved by OH&S Committee : 16th March, 2000

Disclaimer

This Policy was designed for use within the University of Tasmania. The University makes no guarantee and assumes no responsibility as to the absolute correctness for all circumstances or for the adaptation outside the University of Tasmania environment.