



## Repetitive Strain Injury

### Introduction

Repetitive strain injury, or RSI, is an umbrella term used to describe workrelated musculoskeletal (muscles, tendons, ligaments, cartilage, bone) disorders affecting the neck, shoulder, arm, wrist and hand. It is often used very loosely to include conditions that are not necessarily related to repetitive strain such as carpal tunnel syndrome or tendonitis (inflamed tendons).

### What causes RSI?

The most obvious cause of RSI is repetitive movements, which can cause inflammation of the tendons (the tough tissue that attaches a muscle to bone) of the hand or forearm. This is particularly true if the movements are carried out in an awkward posture and without suitable rest periods.

If your work involves prolonged periods of handwriting, typing, microscope or other bench work or other repetitive movements of the fingers, hand or arm you are at risk of developing RSI.

If you work with your hands at or above shoulder level, you are prone to developing rotator cuff tendonitis (inflammation of the muscles and tendons around the shoulder joint). Other risk factors include:

- Poor posture e.g. working with hands above shoulder level
- Handling loads
- Lack of variation in the task performed
- Heavy work load
- Poorly organised workstation
- Maladjusted chairs
- Stress
- Boredom
- Insufficient rest

The risk of RSI increases with age. Studies have also shown that women are more susceptible than men to repetitive strain injuries, as are those who are unfit.

### **How do I know if I have RSI?**

RSI typically involves the arm, shoulder, neck and/or chest wall. Typical symptoms include:

- An underlying ache in the arm, shoulder or neck before onset of pain
- Pain or discomfort in the area affected (severity varies with emotion, activity and the weather)
- Tightness
- Stiffness
- Numbness Pins and needles
- Difficulty performing the activity that caused the problem
- Difficulty with other activities including housework and leisure pursuits
- Generalised fatigue is common
- Poor sleep patterns

### **What is the Law on RSI?**

RSI's are preventable workplace injuries. They happen usually for a combination of reasons and because the employer has:

- Failed to organise the task to make sure that the employee has a variety of positions and movements – to mix it up.
- Failed to provide adequate rest periods. If the work is repetitive or involves a lack of variety in the workers posture, the statutory 30 minute meal break and 20 minute rest period may not be adequate.
- Failed to analyse the workspace with an ergonomist.
- Failed to implement or stick to an ergonomics plan.

### **Example**

A local brewery had a machine for putting lids on cans. It had to be loaded manually with stacks of lids. This procedure was carried out by the employee who had to reach up to near full extension with his arm to load each stack. This procedure was repeated every minute or so, all day long and the employee was not rotated off that machine for several months. He developed a rotator cuff injury to his shoulder.

Through our medical and engineering expert witnesses, Lynch Solicitors were able to establish that the operator could have been spared an injury if he had been provided with a platform from which to load the machine. His case was successful and he received an award of compensation.

### **For More Information**

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