

Soft Tissue Injuries: First Steps

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When asked about ergonomics or soft tissue injuries, many people picture setting up an office desk. Soft tissue injuries plague our industries and cost us money; unfortunately we do not have a simple desk to adjust or set up properly. But there are some simple and inexpensive steps we can take to start protecting our employees and controlling money lost due to strain and sprain or soft tissue-type injuries.

First, some basic facts. On a national level, strains and sprains account for about 620,000 cases or 43 percent of all non-fatal occupational injuries on average per year. I consider the AGC group above average. Last year in our own retro-group plan, AGC group members reported 772 strain and sprain injuries out of 2,271 total injuries. That is roughly 28 percent of our injuries being from strains and sprains. Those injuries took up 34 percent of our group's retro return. What is that in dollars? My math comes out to about \$4.4 million. Ouch!

What can we do about it? There is a long list of options; I want to start with two basic control methods that work:

1. Early reporting of fatigue and body stress.
2. Rotating employees doing repetitive or strenuous tasks.

Early reporting of soreness, fatigue, or stress is key to preventing injury. A little soreness is normal, or even good when you work for a living. It is the body's means of adapting, and it warns us with soreness. But the difference between being a little sore versus being injured may only be a couple of weeks, or even a couple of days in some cases. If we continue to do a task or job without allowing our body to recover from being sore, that soreness may quickly develop into an overuse strain or sprain-type injury, which can be a lost-time injury.

Allowing our bodies to recover happens through job rotation. Take a look at the tasks your employees are doing; try to identify areas at higher risk of causing soreness and fatigue. High-risk task examples would be shoveling, manual material handling, overhead work from a ladder for extended periods, etc. Rotate employees through these strenuous positions and tasks as you are able. Some companies can rotate two times a day; others can rotate weekly or maybe every other week.

The point is, do what you can. Identify areas of highest risk, encourage employees to report early signs of soreness and fatigue, and rotate those employees who are at most risk of soreness and fatigue as you are able. If we all do this, I believe we would have a lot fewer strain and sprain injuries. If you are interested in learning more about prevention of strain- and sprain-type injuries, or would like assistance in implementing some of these controls, contact your AGC safety and loss control consultant and let them work for you.