

## Common symptoms of work strain

- painful necks and shoulders
- aching or stabbing pains in arms or wrists
- feelings of pins and needles
- aching legs, knees and feet
- backaches and back injuries
- stress or tension headaches
- continual tiredness / exhaustion

If you ticked any of these boxes, then people at your workplace are suffering from work strain. The more boxes ticked, the worse is the work strain. People can suffer day after day – no body should put up with it.

## Support, rehabilitation and compensation for workers injured by work strain

If you or other workers are suffering injury or pain from work strain, you have the right to time off work using workers' compensation. Good medical advice and treatment is essential for recovery and rehabilitation.

Delegates and health and safety reps should be working with employers to ensure that workers who are injured by work strain:

- are not blamed or intimidated and are supported by employers and other workers, and
- can exercise their right to choose their own doctor according to the relevant state workers' compensation law – there are workers' health centres in some states, which can provide advice and referral.

Employers must:

- provide suitable (light) duties during workers' rehabilitation and return to work, and
- fix the work that is causing work strain injuries and pain to make the job healthy and safe for everyone.

For medical, legal or compensation advice, contact your union, your state/territory trades and labour council or call the

**ACTU Hotline** on **1300 362 223**.

## No **BODY** should put up with it

### What workers should do

#### 1 Finding the causes of work strain

Get workers, delegates and health and safety reps together to:

- identify the symptoms of work strain that people are suffering – use the list in this leaflet as a start
- do some body mapping
- identify which parts of the job are causing the most common strains and pains, and how and why
- do some workplace mapping
- work out solutions, with both short and long term time lines
- put pressure on your employer or management to take action
- hold regular health and safety meetings with members to monitor progress
- involve all workers, including casuals, part timers and contract or agency workers

#### 2 Getting the problems fixed

Employers must change any work that is harming workers.

This will require the ongoing involvement of all workers, delegates and health and safety representatives.

If the employer is unwilling to listen or to make improvements, it may be necessary to use other methods, for example:

- **Issuing a Provisional Improvement Notice (PIN), default or written notice**
- **Implementing a cease work order**
- **Calling in a government health and safety inspector**

Government health and safety inspectors can direct employers to fix problems in the workplace and can issue prohibition or improvement notices. If a government inspector comes to the workplace, make sure that he or she involves the health and safety representatives and the workers.

For more information on these options, or to get involved in the work strain campaign, contact your union, your state trades and labour council or the **ACTU hotline** on **1300 362 223**.

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# WORK STRAIN CAUSES REAL PAIN

## No **BODY** should put up with it

**Union Hotline: 1300 362 223** [www.actu.com.au](http://www.actu.com.au)

**Work strain** causes injuries and pain to our backs, shoulders, necks, arms, wrists and our whole bodies. These are the most common health and safety problems in Australia. In 2001, more than 76,000 Australian workers received workers' compensation for what are commonly called sprain and strain or musculoskeletal injuries – that's more than 200 per day!

However, we know that many more workers are suffering, because less than half the people who are injured at work receive any compensation. Often these are part time, casual, contract / agency workers and the self-employed. Some are forced out of the workforce by their work strain injuries.

### Work strain causes real pain

Sprain and strain or musculoskeletal injuries have been around for a long time. They happen in all jobs and to all types of workers - from nurses to construction workers, from truck drivers to call centre workers, from teachers to manufacturing workers, and to retail, warehouse and office workers.

Musculoskeletal injuries can be caused by a single event, such as lifting a heavy object or person. However, more often work strain builds up over time, causing chronic injury and pain.

### Work stress makes it worse

We are under pressure to work harder and faster. Too many workers are facing increasing workloads, longer hours, job insecurity, understaffing, stress, bullying, violence, deficient management and poor work organisation.

People are feeling mental stress on top of physical work strain.

Work stress can cause muscle tension, headaches and chronic pain in the neck, shoulders, arms and backs. Stress can also make existing injuries and pain worse.

More people are likely to be suffering from work strain when workers have little or no say in how work is done. And, when people feel they have no choice but to keep on working while injured or in pain, the injuries persist and the pain just gets worse.

## Stress + strain = real pain

## The work environment

Some people think that work strain is just 'part of the job'. This is not true. It is preventable and should be stopped.

### These are some of the working conditions that can cause work strain. Is this your workplace? Tick if yes.

- Workers are under too much pressure
- There's too much work to do
- There's not enough staff to do the work
- Workers are doing repetitive tasks
- There's a lot of lifting, pushing and pulling
- Work stations are not designed for the job
- People have to bend or twist around
- People work in awkward, painful postures
- Work is sedentary with no physical relief
- Workers are using unsuitable equipment
- Work systems cause OHS problems
- People are expected to work too fast
- Targets are impossible to achieve
- The boss monitors everybody
- People are working too many hours
- Rosters are not healthy, safe or fair
- People feel exhausted most of the time
- Workers are being bullied
- People are afraid to speak up
- Workers have no choice or control

The more boxes ticked the more likely it is that people are suffering from work strain.

Total score \_\_\_\_ / **20**

- 5 - 10** = levels of work strain becoming high
- 10 - 15** = levels of work strain likely to be very high
- 15 - 20** = this is most probably an unhealthy, even dangerous workplace

## There's no need for it

There have been health and safety laws in Australian states and territories for more than 15 years. These laws are meant to prevent work strain injuries, but many employers do not follow them and governments are not enforcing them.

Despite the huge number of musculoskeletal injuries caused by work strain, less than 1% of the employers who caused them have been prosecuted.

## The laws aren't good enough

National health and safety standards do not recognise that stress can cause - as well as add to - work strain and pain. This is not good enough.

Research shows that excessive workloads, long hours and little or no worker control over how work is done can lead to musculoskeletal injuries and make them worse.

## What are employers doing?

Too many employers are talking about workers needing to lift properly, to practise stress management, or they 'rotate' workers from one unsafe job to another. These "solutions" do not prevent work strain.

On top of this, employers often intimidate and blame workers for being injured or in pain, when work strain is the cause.

## What employers should be doing

Employers should be:

- consulting with workers and elected representatives on working conditions and health and safety – this should be ongoing
- preventing work strain by eliminating unnecessary lifting, bending, twisting, carrying, repetitive tasks and awkward positions
- ensuring that work stations and equipment are suitable for the tasks and do not cause injuries or pain
- providing sufficient staff and resources for the job
- ensuring that hours of work and work loads do not put workers under constant pressure

Too many employers have a poor track record when it comes to genuinely involving workers in decision-making at work. This is despite conclusive evidence that workers having a say in decisions results in less injuries and health problems.