



# The Group Solutions Sit-Down

## Workplace Disability Prevention Mini-Series: Musculoskeletal Disorders

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

employees, musculoskeletal disorders, ergonomics, injuries, workplace, disability, hunched, poor posture, work, lost productivity, pain, breaks, employers, job, neck, computer.

### SPEAKERS

Cassie Mills, Kristen Osburn

#### **Kristen 00:07**

Workplace injuries happen every day. From sprains, strains, and tears to migraines and chronic pain, workers in all occupations and industries are exposed to a broad range of injury risks. And each year, these risks leave millions of workers unable to do their jobs on a short-term or long-term basis. In fact, according to the National Safety Council, there were 105,000,000 days lost due to work-related injuries in 2019. Which cost businesses \$53.9 billion in wage and productivity losses alone. The good news is that through workplace disability prevention and identifying at-risk employees before a disability occurs, we can help prevent disabilities or reduce their severity and shorten the duration of an absence. I'm Kristen Osburn, a marketing strategist with New York Life Group Benefit Solutions. In this five part mini-series, I sit down with Cassie Mills, a certified rehabilitation counselor and ergonomic specialist with New York Life Group Benefit Solutions, to discuss workplace disability prevention and the key steps that employers can take to help their employees stay healthy and productive at work. In this episode we'll be focusing on musculoskeletal disorders.

Cassie, welcome to The Group Solutions Sit-Down. I'm so excited to have you on the show!

#### **Cassie 01:41**

Thank you. I am so happy to be here today.

#### **Kristen 01:43**

Well, Cassie, I think it would be helpful if we start with a better understanding of exactly what a Musculoskeletal Disorder is, and maybe some common musculoskeletal disorders that we often see happening in the workplace.

### **Cassie 02:00**

Absolutely. So I'm going to shorten the musculoskeletal disorder to what we like to call MSD. It tends to be a little easier to say. But MSDs are really those injuries or disorders that affect the human body's movement or musculoskeletal system. So think about the muscles, the tendons, the ligaments, your disc, things like that. And we use the term MSD because it accurately describes the problem, but some other names for these musculoskeletal disorders that you might see or hear in the workplace or even if you were maybe experiencing them on their own are called repetitive motion injuries, repetitive stress injuries or overuse injuries. These types of injuries are typically preventable. Some examples might include your carpal tunnel syndrome, tendinitis, muscle or tendon strains or sprains, even herniated disc, but there are some that are degenerative in nature. And those typically are like your degenerative disc disease in the back or you can have degenerative disease in your knees as well.

### **Kristen 03:11**

So Cassie, what you're saying it sounds like is that me being hunched over my computer right now. And typing all day is probably not helping my musculoskeletal system.

### **Cassie 03:23**

Definitely not Kristen. Would not advise in that. In fact, the workplace including working from home, which has been a big part of this past year, can be a huge factor for MSDs because of the ongoing force, repetition, and poor posture associated with most jobs. In fact, according to the United States Department of Labor, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which is also known as OSHA, musculoskeletal disorders are the leading cause of pain, suffering, and disability in American workplaces. And this comes really from improper workstation setup, and proper body mechanics. People not moving throughout their day, stretching or overuse of personal devices. A good example might be somebody that is working in a sedentary job, and they might be experiencing upper shoulder, back, and upper neck pain. This really probably could come from just what you said hunching over, maybe what I like to call a chicken neck, jutting your chin out a little bit in front and not keeping everything in proper alignment. People might experience elbow and wrist pain from constant use of the mouse or typing. And more common is usually the back and knee pain. And that could be from improper lifting, improper bending, and sitting all day at a workstation for 9 to 10 hours.

### **Kristen 04:51**

Wow. Well, Cassie, I know I've personally experienced a lot of the factors and the side effects that you just mentioned, even including chicken neck, apparently! So from everything you mentioned, it really sounds like musculoskeletal disorders are not only a common, painful, and costly problem that employees experience, but also can be really, I imagine, costly for employers that want to help keep their employees healthy and at work.

### **Cassie 05:24**

Yeah, Kristen, it's actually kind of alarming. According to the 2018 Liberty Mutual Workplace Safety Index study, non-fatal workplace injuries cost U.S. businesses nearly \$60 billion dollars yearly in direct costs alone. This translates to more than \$1 billion dollars every week spent by U.S. businesses on these injuries! But that's just direct costs... there's also an indirect cost that employers experience like lost productivity. In fact, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found in their 2018 Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses that MSD cases required 38% more lost days than the average injury or illnesses. The numbers stayed the same for 2019 as well. And really, when we're looking at the indirect cost, not only is it productivity, but also employees that have to go out on leave and then the businesses are having to spend money not only trying to maybe hire someone new or maybe another employee might have to potentially take over and help cover that employee's job duties so then you're putting extra strain on all the other employees and a larger financial strain on the businesses.

### **Kristen 06:40**

My goodness Cassie, a billion dollars a week... that is huge! That's a lot of money! And I imagine that with a lot of money comes a lot of pain as a result of these musculoskeletal disorders. So it really seems like the cost is high on all ends, both for the employee and the employer. And that really brings me to what can we do then, Cassie? What can we do to change this and really reduce the risk of musculoskeletal disorders in the workplace?

### **Cassie 07:15**

So really, one of the main things is employees working in a sedentary type job, really need to be aware of their posture in their environment. And that's what we call ergonomics. So, like you said earlier, hunching over your computer... try not to hunch over the computer, Kristen. Should also try to take regular small breaks throughout your day from using your electronics and stretch your body. When I say using your electronics that also means your personal phone, and other devices. Individuals I think tend to not realize that when they go from a computer to picking up their phone, not only are they continuing to strain their eyes, their elbows are bent, and having poor posture looking over the phone as well. But employers, really when you look from an employer standpoint, what would be good for them to do is they should ensure workstation, the work area etc., are properly set up with the right equipment for healthy ergonomics, which will help reduce the repetitive movements that employees are doing. Provide online or handouts that show how workstations are set up and how the equipment is to be used properly, meaning the proper ergonomics and make it the norm for ergo breaks throughout the day. They could add timers to computers, they could use stretching breaks throughout the day. I tend to, when I'm talking to people, tell them not to use Outlook, because we're so conditioned and used to our pop-ups and reminders on Outlook that, unfortunately, a lot of times we disregard them. So using a different type of timer, or something that gets your attention to take that break throughout the day. Really make it the norm that it's okay to step away. And when I say step away, we're talking even like anywhere from one to three, maybe five minutes, max. Also encourage employees to engage in some physical activity, whether it be to walk around the building at lunch, maybe there's a gym in the area when everyone is able to get back into an office. Maybe just simple things as if you do print out, let's say some work, you still print out paper, maybe set up the printer farther away. So you actually have to get up and go and get things that you've printed out instead of having it right next to you while you're seated. So those are just a few things that I think employers really could focus on and helping their employees while they're at work.

### **Kristen 09:43**

So Cassie, if I have chicken neck as I put my neck out to look at my computer, when I'm holding my cell phone is that like giraffe neck or something?

### **Cassie 09:53**

Absolutely could be!

### **Kristen 09:54**

Well, Cassie, I think that given all the tips you just shared, we probably both should go take a stretch break or something. What do you think?

### **Cassie 10:04**

Absolutely. I'm feeling a little stiff.

### **Kristen 10:07**

Well, Cassie, thank you again for joining me on the show. This was incredibly informative and I especially really appreciate all the practical tips and tools you gave us. I know I'm going to think about how I sit and look at my phone a little bit differently. Listeners, make sure you tune into the other four parts of our Workplace

Disability Prevention Series where we'll also be discussing ergonomics a little deeper, accommodations, mental health, and migraines, and just continue our overall discussion on helping employees stay healthy and productive at work.

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