

# Managing pain at work

Chronic pain can be disabling and should be managed through a workplace disability management (WDM) system. Disability is a protected ground under the *Ontario Human Rights Code*. Supporting and accommodating workers as they manage their pain at work is not only a legal obligation—it is also a compassionate response.

Since workplaces are often a source of chronic pain, employers should support workers living with chronic pain in the same way they support workers with any other chronic illness.

## Explain dangers

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are a major cause of pain among construction workers. According to the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB), MSDs represent over 40 per cent of all lost-time compensation claims in Ontario. Left unaddressed, MSDs can impact workers' health and safety, as well as businesses' economic performance.

According to the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, about 34 per cent of construction workers have at least one MSD symptom. Opioid use is three times higher among construction workers with MSDs compared to those without.

## Identify controls

### Finding solutions together

Focus on listening to and communicating openly with workers who have chronic pain. Leaders should avoid pressuring employees to share information about chronic pain. Instead of asking direct pain-related questions, leaders should ask workers, "How can I help?"

### Preventing work-related pain

Jobs that involve heavy lifting, prolonged standing, repetitive tasks, or working in awkward postures can cause pain or make pain worse.

Construction workplaces must focus on improving workplace ergonomics in order to reduce MSDs.

Workplaces need to support workers in injury recovery, educate workers about pain management, conduct frequent pain assessments, and build a chronic pain management program for employees and supervisors.

## Designing jobs with autonomy and variety

Autonomy and skill use can help with chronic pain because workers can decide how and when they do tasks based on their abilities at any given time.

Working at a job that requires multiple skills can keep workers with chronic pain functional even when they are experiencing pain.

## Demonstrate

- Review common tasks and identify or eliminate the potential hazards that could lead to pain or harm.
- Share pain-related resources with all workers, including online resources from Pain Canada, Health Quality Ontario, the Canadian Pain Society, and the Chronic Pain Network.
- Help all workers understand the need for safe and informed chronic pain management.
- Encourage workers to seek individualized pain management treatment plans with a knowledgeable primary care provider.