

## Advice Sheet for Repetitive Strain Injury of the Upper Limb

### WHAT IS REPETITIVE STRAIN INJURY?

RSI (or Repetitive Strain Injury) is used to describe an injury which results from the overuse of particularly the upper limb. Repeated use of the same movements causes inflammation and damage to the soft tissues (muscles, nerves, tendons and tendon sheaths etc). It's also known as work-related upper limb disorder, or non-specific upper limb pain.

### WHAT CAUSES REPETITIVE STRAIN INJURY

RSI is most commonly caused by a repeated action carried out on a daily basis.

RSI can be caused by many factors. They include:

- Repeated arm use for too long
- Working with equipment that doesn't fit your body
- Working too fast
- Not having enough recovery breaks
- Holding your muscles in the same position for a long time
- Lack of training in the safest way to carry out a task
- Lack of variety in the type of work you do
- Working in cold conditions
- doing an activity that involves force, such as lifting heavy objects
- poor posture or activities that require you to work in an awkward position

### SYMPTOMS

Symptoms of RSI or an overuse injury can range from mild to severe and usually develop gradually. They can be any of the following:

- Burning, aching or shooting pain.
- Stiffness
- Tingling or numbness
- Tremors, clumsiness and numbness.
- Fatigue or lack of strength.
- Weakness in the hands or forearms. It is often difficult to perform even simple tasks.
- Difficulty with normal activities like opening doors, chopping vegetables, turning on a tap.
- Chronically cold hands, particularly the fingertips.

- Symptoms may disappear when you stop the aggravating activity. It may take only a few hours for the symptoms to settle, it may take as long as a couple of days or it may require treatment.

## HOW TO LOOK AFTER IT AT HOME

The first step in treating RSI is usually to identify and modify the task or activity that is causing the symptoms. If necessary, you may need to stop doing the activity altogether.

- You can review aspects of your lifestyle yourself, such as your hobbies or general stress levels. The most important thing is to notice the factors that are causing or aggravating your RSI and make changes accordingly.
- If you work at a computer all day, make sure your seat, keyboard, mouse and screen are positioned so that they cause the least amount of strain to your fingers, hands, wrists, neck and back.
- Sit at your desk with a good posture. Adjust your chair so that your forearms are horizontal with the desk and your eyes are the same height as the top of your computer screen.
- If you do a repetitive task at work try to take regular breaks. It is better to take smaller breaks more frequently than just one long break at lunch.
- Speak to your employer if there is anything relating to your working environment that you feel could be improved
- Some people with symptoms of RSI find that including exercise in their daily routine, such as walking or swimming, helps to ease their symptoms.

## PROFESSIONAL TREATMENT

It is vital to seek treatment for RSI as soon as possible. This increases the chances of recovery and reduces the risk of long-term problems.

There are many treatment options for RSI. They all aim to relieve pain and enable your strength and mobility to return. Treatment options include:

To relieve symptoms, your GP may advise taking a course of anti-inflammatory painkillers (such as aspirin or ibuprofen), or using a heat or cold pack, elastic support or splint.

A Physiotherapist will give you advice on posture and how to strengthen or relax your muscles. They will also do some manual therapy to reduce pain and stiffness and provide you with exercises to do at home.

## PREVENTION

Preventing the development of RSI, or relieving your symptoms, involves understanding and reviewing the lifestyle factors that cause RSI, including work, hobbies, general stress and posture.

Most employers carry out a risk assessment when you join a company to check that your work area is suitable and comfortable for you. You can request an assessment if you haven't had one.

There are also things you can do to help reduce your risk of RSI, such as:

- maintaining good posture at work – see how to sit at a desk correctly
- taking regular breaks from long or repetitive tasks – it's better to take smaller, more frequent breaks than one long lunch break
- trying relaxation techniques if you're stressed
- If you work at a computer all day, make sure your seat, keyboard, mouse and screen are positioned so they cause the least amount of strain.