



## **Repetitive Strain Injury – RSI Non-specific Upper Limb Pain - NSULP**

(Also known as OOS; Occupational Overuse Syndrome or WRULD; Work Related Upper Limb Disorder)

### **What is it?**

RSI/NSULP includes a range of painful conditions that causes mild irritation of the muscles, tendons, nerves that can be very painful and other soft tissues. It is mainly caused by repetitive use or sustained postures. It is usually related to a job or occupation, but leisure activities particularly using computers can cause these symptoms. Unlike a 'normal' strain following a sudden injury, symptoms of RSI/NSULP can persist well beyond the time it would take symptoms of a 'normal' strain to ease.

### **What causes it?**

The main cause is frequent and repetitive, sustained movements and/or postures of a part of the body. For example, typing or using a computer mouse a lot. Other factors may contribute such as poor posture whilst doing the movement, using excessive force whilst doing the movement, or not scheduling short breaks from the task. The precise reason why RSI develops is not clear. In many cases there is no swelling, inflammation or other obvious problems which develop in the muscles or tendons. Also, it is not clear why some people develop RSI and not others who do the same tasks.

### **Symptoms**

In most cases the symptoms develop in an arm, wrist or hand as these parts of the body most commonly do repetitive tasks. In recent years it is computer operators, typists, musicians and people doing repetitive tasks in factories who most commonly develop RSI. People who do a lot of DIY around the house may develop RSI, or people who do certain sports which involve repetitive movements.

Symptoms develop gradually and can include: pain, tightness, dull ache, throbbing, numbness, or tingling in the affected area. At first the symptoms may only occur whilst you do the repetitive task and ease with rest. In time the symptoms can be present all the time, but tend to be made worse by doing the repetitive task.

### **What can you do?**

It is thought that the earlier the problem is recognised and dealt with, the better the outcome. It is thought that treatment requires a number of components but the most important things are work is not unsafe, whilst it is uncomfortable most people will recover, early return to work assists, and employees, employers, line managers and occupational health teams need to be working together.

- If possible, stop or reduce the repetitive tasks or activities which are causing the symptoms. Discuss the problem with your employer as a change of task or work environment may be possible. Although some work will be very difficult most people can stay at work with temporary adjustments and a gradual resumption of normal duties.
- Conventional investigations such as x-ray, ultrasound, MRI, blood tests, and nerve conduction studies will not show any obvious cause to the pain.
- Medication as recommended by your pharmacist or GP.
- Observing good posture and taking regular breaks from your workstation that has been appropriately set up are all important.
- Some people find treatments such as yoga, relaxation techniques, regular general exercise (such as swimming) to be useful in easing the symptoms.
- Adopt a can do approach and focus on what you can do. An early return to work where possible is recommended.

### **Can you prevent it?**

Symptoms often ease with the above measures. It is then wise to review your work or other activities to reduce the likelihood of recurrence. For example:

- If you work with a computer, is your seat, keyboard, mouse, etc, positioned in the correct way with the least strain likely on your hands and fingers.
- Do you sit with a good posture if you have a desk job?
- If you do a repetitive task at work, do you take regular, short, postural breaks from your repetitive activities and sustained postures?
- Is there anything you and your employer could do to improve your working environment?

In many cases the symptoms ease and cause little discomfort or disruption to work and leisure activities if measures are taken to stop or reduce the repetitive task as soon as the symptoms start to develop. However, despite rest and treatment some people develop symptoms that persist long-term which can range from disruptive to debilitating.