

# Hidden disabilities

## Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI)

### Reasonable Adjustments

RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury) is an umbrella term for a range of painful conditions affecting the musculoskeletal system.



An alternative umbrella term for many of these injuries is Work Related Upper Limb Disorder (WRULD).

The Health & Safety Executive uses the term ULD (Upper Limb Disorder) under a general heading of Musculoskeletal Disorders, which also includes back pain.

RSI is usually caused or aggravated by work and is associated with repetitive movement, sustained or constrained postures and/or forceful movements.

It includes many different localised conditions, e.g.:

- bursitis;
- carpal tunnel syndrome;
- tenosynovitis;
- tendinitis;
- epicondylitis (including tennis elbow);
- writers' cramp; and
- white finger or Raynaud's syndrome.



There is also diffuse RSI, which spreads through areas of the body and is harder to diagnose.

Workers particularly at risk include those using computers, working on assembly lines, manual labourers, bus and lorry drivers, cashiers, cooks, cleaners and housekeepers, hairdressers, and ambulance workers.



RSI is a growing problem with the vast increase in computerisation.

RSI is a progressive condition and goes through stages. Initially the pain, aching and tiredness of muscles during the day improves overnight. Later however the problems persist even when the worker is resting. Some conditions can become irreversible.

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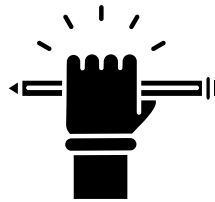
# Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI)



## Reasonable Adjustments

Research carried out at UCL indicates a possible cause may be nerve damage. Common symptoms are:

- pain;
- loss of grip;
- loss of movement;
- muscle weakness or spasm;
- numbness;
- sensation of cold;
- burning sensation; and ,
- pins and needles.



It is very important to recognise symptoms early and take remedial action.

Depending on the form of RSI, workers may find they are unable to write, type, dial or hold a telephone receiver, turn on taps, brush teeth, get dressed, operate domestic machinery, do housework, grip a cup of coffee, use a knife, hold a tray, put up a picture, drive or sew and open drawers amongst many other everyday tasks.

Sometimes activities can only be performed very slowly or with pain; only in the morning (after overnight rest); provided it is not too cold or if the worker is under stress (when muscles tense up); or in an unusual way (e.g. using an electric toothbrush).

The following are examples that may amount to substantial adverse effects such as:

- difficulty getting dressed;
- difficulty preparing a meal, e.g. because of restricted ability to do things like open cans or packages;
- difficulty operating a computer, e.g. because of physical restrictions in using a keyboard; and,
- difficulty picking up and carrying objects of moderate weight.



If employed, the worker should be protected even if it is work itself which causes or worsens the conditions, as long as the condition itself affects day-to-day activities.

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**Work Place Reasonable Adjustments: what you and your colleagues can do at your workplace**



As always, appropriate adjustments will depend on the individual situation and the person should be consulted.

**In employment situations:**

The employer should carry out a risk assessment . The Health & Safety Executive has produced risk assessment checklists. The employer should also set up internal reporting systems and monitor for early signs of RSI.



The employer should review the design of tools, workplaces and tasks. They should: keep tools lightweight, sharpened, lubricated and easy to use; provide powered versions if possible; mechanical options for moving loads; enable smaller loads and reduced carrying distances; introduce levers; facilitate training on lifting techniques; adapt tools and equipment to meet individual needs; ensure women do not use tools designed for men.



## Redesigning to minimise repetitive movement.

**1. Redesign workstations so that everything is within easy reach.**



**2. Provide adjustable work benches.**



**3. Utilise proper ergonomic design.**



**4. Reduce conveyor belt speeds.**





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## Work Place Reasonable Adjustments:

**5. Reduce use of vibrating tools and provide vibration absorbing grips or rubber flooring to absorb vibration.**



**6. Reduce the amount of time working in cold environment.**



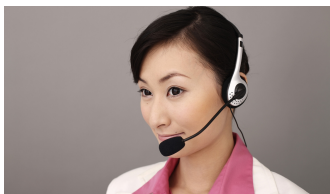
**7. Allow warm breaks.**



**8. Provide protective clothing, though gloves can increase the problem by making grip difficult.**



**9. Provide electronic staplers, easy grip pens and a headset telephone.**



**10. Restrict intensive keyboard work.**



**11. Keep deadlines reasonable.**

**12. Train in touch typing.**

**13. Ensure the provision of good lighting**

**14. Provide voice recognition software and allow extra time for its use. Provide training for use of specialist software.**



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## Work Place Reasonable Adjustments:

Employers must pay for eye tests if requested, where the worker uses a VDU as a significant part of their work.



### In general:

1. Avoid allocating repetitive work and incentives to carry it out at a high pace. Allow rest and recovery breaks.



2. Give employees more control over their work rate and breaks. Enable task variation and job rotation.



3. Provide training on risks.



4. Reduce the level of mental and physical stress.



5. Allow time off to recover, with a staged return, and improved workplace (to prevent recurring injury.)

6. Allow a job candidate with RSI take an administrative test using voice activated software, if that is how they would potentially do the job.

7. Different or longer training on new machinery for workers with restricted hand or arm movements.

8. Relocating light switches, door handles or shelves for someone who has difficulty reaching.

**For further examples, see [Shoulder, Arm and Hand Impairment](#).**

**Note: if the employer's negligence has caused the RSI or if the employer refuses to make improvements and the worker's condition becomes worse, the worker may have grounds for claiming personal injury.**