



Work related back disorders driving absenteeism

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Work-related back disorders are a significant and increasing problem in office workplaces the world over and a major contributor to rising absenteeism. Richard Andrews, Managing Director of Inspiration Office, an Africa-wide office space and furniture consultancy said that studies suggest that between 60% and 90% of people will suffer from low back disorders at some point in their life and that at any one time between 15% and 42% of people are suffering from problem backs in the workplace.

“Data from a European survey on working conditions reveal that 30% of European workers suffer from back pain, which tops the list of all reported work-related disorders. “In South Africa, back pain is also the number one work related disorder.”

Although in most cases, patients make a full recovery from an episode of low back pain (60-70 % recover within 6 weeks, 70-90 % within 12 weeks) this still adds up to a very large amount of lost time from work. “In addition the recurrence rate for low back disorders is very high,” Andrews noted. “In one year the recurrence rate is between 20% and 44% and over a lifetime recurrences of up to 85% are reported. It is important to remember that once injured, the back can become susceptible and re-injury is more likely if there are risk factors in the work place that are not corrected.”

Although very common across all types of industries and jobs that , several studies have demonstrated that low back disorder rates are particularly prevalent in certain types of industries and within certain occupations. Particularly high prevalence rates in offices are found for example among: call centre workers, lawyers, bankers, receptionists and client facing jobs like tellers. “All these jobs require very long hours of sitting with little opportunity to move round because they are often so intense, “ said Andrews.

Low back disorders include spinal disc problems such as hernias and and soft tissue injuries. In addition to the normal degenerative aging process, studies reveal that poor ergonomic

factors in the workplace contribute to low back disorders in a healthy back or accelerate existing changes “Poor ergonomic work factors increase the load or strain on the back. This may arise from many situations such as when chairs slant to the side or are the wrong pitch causing the back to hyper-extend or slump forward. Sustained periods of doing this can cause severe damage later on,” Andrews added. Strategies to prevent low back disorders should include both workplace based and health care based interventions.

“It sounds obvious but a good, ergonomically sound chair is the best place to start. Skimping on chairs may save money in the short term might seem appealing but the cost saving is dwarfed by loss of productivity in the long run.” Increasingly there is recognition that an integrated approach is effective too. And that means teaching workers the best way to sit in chairs, managing their stress, providing access to expert medical help for those with back problems and encouraging workers to move around during the day and exercise regularly once they leave the office.