



# Early notification and intervention of discomfort or pain: Good practice guide

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## Disclaimer:

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# Intervention strategies for discomfort or pain

## 1. Introduction

WorkSafe New Zealand has highlighted that approximately 30% of all work-related harm is attributed to musculoskeletal injuries. Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 (HSWA), PCBUs (Persons Conducting a Business or Undertaking) are required to ensure the health and safety of workers by eliminating or minimising musculoskeletal risks as far as is reasonably practicable. To meet these obligations, WorkSafe expects PCBUs to:

- Implement good work design principles and practices in the work environment which eliminate musculoskeletal risks or minimise them, so far as is reasonably practicable.
- Engage with workers when identifying musculoskeletal risks and their controls, including when changing work processes.
- Monitor the health of workers and the conditions at work to prevent work-related musculoskeletal disorders developing or being exacerbated.

Early notification of discomfort or pain plays a vital role in addressing these issues before they escalate into significant injuries. Proactively managing discomfort helps maintain worker wellbeing, reduces downtime, and boosts productivity. According to a report by Monash University, early intervention can lead to significant savings for employers by reducing the duration of claims and associated costs.

ShopCare has launched a good practice guide for early notification and intervention of discomfort or pain; a programme aimed at developing standardised guidance for early intervention of discomfort or pain to prevent workplace injuries. This initiative is informed by a comprehensive review of best practices in both New Zealand and internationally, and seeks to foster safer work environments across the retail industry and its supply chain.

## 2. What is early notification of discomfort or pain?

Early notification of discomfort or pain involves workers reporting any signs of physical discomfort or pain before they develop into more serious conditions or injuries. This includes discomfort in muscles, joints, tendons, or other areas commonly caused by repetitive movements, poor posture, or inadequate work conditions.

Early intervention aims to prevent mild discomfort from progressing into injuries that may require time off work or medical treatment. The primary goal is to minimise and manage discomfort while keeping workers active and maintaining productivity in the workplace.

Examples of discomfort or pain include:

- Soreness in the back, shoulders, or neck after repetitive tasks.
- Tingling or numbness in the hands or arms during manual tasks.
- A feeling of fatigue or weakness in muscles after long periods of standing or sitting.
- Joint discomfort or pain when performing regular tasks.

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### 3. Why is early notification and intervention important?

Early treatment of discomfort or pain is essential to prevent it from worsening and to ensure that the correct treatment plan is in place for a quick recovery. Prompt intervention helps avoid prolonged discomfort and ensures a faster return to normal activity.

In most cases, discomfort or pain occur without a specific injury. For example, having a headache doesn't necessarily mean you have a head injury. Similarly, around 80% of back pain cases have no identifiable cause, such as a direct injury.

It is important to acknowledge that workers often under-report issues related to discomfort or pain for a variety of reasons, including:

- Concerns about losing work hours or being placed on medical incapacity.
- Feeling hesitant due to language barriers that make it difficult to articulate experiences or symptoms.
- Feeling discouraged or reluctant to speak up if there is already a workplace history of inaction regarding such reports.

Recognising these barriers is essential to fostering a supportive environment where workers feel empowered to report concerns.

#### Addressing discomfort or pain early on can:

- Prevent the development of more serious injuries.
- Significantly reduce the recovery time needed.

#### By intervening before a worker seeks medical assistance, the business could:

- Prevent discomfort or pain from escalating into more serious conditions.
- Facilitate quicker recovery.
- Prevent lost-time injuries (LTI) or medical treatment injuries (MTI), thereby reducing absenteeism.
- Maintain productivity in the workplace.

#### Key benefits of early notification and intervention:

- **Prevention:** Early action helps prevent discomfort from turning into long-term injuries, such as musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs).
- **Worker wellbeing:** A culture of early reporting promotes health, boosts morale, and reduces absenteeism. It demonstrates that the employer is committed to the safety and wellbeing of its employees.
- **Compliance:** It supports meeting health and safety obligations under New Zealand's Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, which requires employers to ensure a safe working environment.
- **Reduced costs:** Early intervention minimises the need for costly treatments, compensation claims, and extended time off work.

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## 4. What causes discomfort or pain?

Discomfort or pain are often the result of a combination of factors. Some common contributors include:

- Poor work design. Poorly designed tasks inevitably lead to an increased risk of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs).
- Poor general health and fitness levels for the demands of the job.
- Stress (both work-related and personal) and fatigue.
- The physical demands and repetitive tasks of manual handling and individual posture or work techniques.
- Perceived lack of support from supervisors, managers, or co-workers.
- Cultural and personal attitudes toward discomfort, pain and activity.
- Lack of job satisfaction.

Department managers can play a key role in minimising the effects of some of these factors, such as optimising workplace layout, addressing manual handling practices, and fostering positive supervisor/ manager/ worker relationships.

## 5. Identifying early warning signs

Recognising early warning signs can help you support workers who may be at risk of physical discomfort or injury. Observing certain behaviours or physical signs can indicate a need for intervention to prevent further issues.

### Behaviours to watch for

- Unusual or erratic behaviour
- Increased use of caffeine, cigarettes, or sedatives
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Conflict with team members or a manager
- Loss of confidence
- Incomplete or delayed work tasks

### Physical signs

- Tiredness or low energy
- Discomfort or pain, or difficulty performing physical tasks; reduced range of movement
- Difficulty sleeping
- Change in appearance or dishevelment
- Gastrointestinal discomfort

By recognising these signs early, you can encourage timely intervention to help prevent physical discomfort from progressing to a more serious injury.

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## 6. How to identify who is suitable for early intervention

Early intervention is for workers who have developed discomfort or pain during their regular work activities, such as without an incident occurring. Examples of workers more at risk are:

- Those with manual, labour-intensive roles.
- Those working in cluttered or confined environments.
- Those sitting or standing for a prolonged amount of time.

Consider offering early intervention support to workers whose discomfort or pain affects their ability to work, regardless of the cause. Providing guidance on self-management and available treatments can aid in recovery and enhance both productivity and a positive safety culture.

## 7. How to identify who is unsuitable for early intervention

The process is not suitable when:

- An injury is the result of impact, a slip or a trip.
- There is a sudden onset of severe pain.
- The worker is unable to move freely.

These situations require medical assessment.

## 8. Aims of an early notification and intervention programme

The aims of an early notification and intervention programme are to:

1. Promote a positive workplace culture around early reporting and self-management.
2. Assist workers in returning to their normal activities.
3. Educate workers on safe work practices to reduce the risk of future injuries.
4. Identify workplace issues and provide management with recommendations to improve safety.
5. Recommend referral to a doctor or health professional if needed.

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## 9. Process for an early notification and intervention programme

To manage early reporting of discomfort or pain effectively, employers must establish a clear, simple, and accessible process that encourages workers to report any discomfort as soon as possible.

### Step 1: Create an open reporting culture

- **Encourage communication:** Make it clear to all workers that reporting discomfort or pain is encouraged and will not lead to any disadvantages.
- **Train frontline leaders:** Ensure supervisors are approachable, trained to handle early notifications, and know the importance of immediate response.
- **Communicate regularly:** Use posters, team meetings, and emails to remind workers that early reporting is key to their wellbeing.

### Step 2: Establish clear reporting channels

- **Designate a reporting system:** This could be through a health and safety app, an email system, or direct verbal reports to supervisors.
- **Provide forms for reporting:** Have a simple and easy-to-use form available for reporting discomfort or pain. This could be a digital or paper form.

A template of an early notification of discomfort or pain reporting form can be found in the appendices.

### Step 3: Implement an immediate response protocol

When a worker reports discomfort, it's essential that action is taken immediately to prevent it from progressing to pain or an injury.

**Immediate response checklist:**

- **Stop the task:** Ensure the worker stops the task causing discomfort.
- **Assess the discomfort or pain:** Conduct a quick assessment to understand the level of discomfort. Is it mild, moderate, or severe?
- **Review the task:** If possible, provide body positioning advice and/or workstation adjustments, and, if required, provide tools to support, eliminate and reduce MSD harm.
- **Rest the affected area:** Encourage the worker to rest the part of the body that is in discomfort, even for short intervals.
- **Apply early treatment:** Provide access to ice packs, equipment to support, eliminate and reduce MSD harm, or adjustments to the workspace. Consider physiotherapy as an immediate first-response treatment.
- Record the report and actions taken for future reference.
- Follow up with the worker and offer access to an appropriate medical practitioner, e.g. a physiotherapist or occupational therapist, to help address discomfort before it worsens. A

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physiotherapist will discuss the initial findings with the worker and recommend further sessions if required or refer the worker to a medical professional for further examination.

#### Step 4: Review and follow-up

After the initial report of discomfort or pain, employers should conduct follow-ups to ensure the issue has been resolved.

- **Short-term follow-up:** Check in with the worker after 24 hours to see if there is improvement.
- **Long-term follow-up:** Schedule a follow-up a few days or a week later to ensure the discomfort hasn't returned.
- **Adjust the role if necessary:** If discomfort or pain persists, consider temporarily modifying the worker's duties.

## 10. Intervention strategies to prevent discomfort or pain from progressing to injury

### 10.1 Pre-employment screening (PEA) / Functional capacity evaluation (FCE)

Consider implementing a pre-employment physical screening programme to assess whether an applicant can safely perform the required tasks. This helps prevent placing workers at risk if they are not physically suited for the role.

### 10.2 Workplace ergonomic assessment

Provide workplace ergonomic assessments to ensure that workers' workstations, tools, and equipment are adjusted to their needs. This includes:

- Proper seating and standing positions.
- Correct lifting techniques.
- Tools designed to minimise strain.

### 10.3 Work design

Design tasks to reduce MSD risks by minimising manual lifting, twisting, and repetitive motions. Use tools like adjustable workstations, adjustable stools, anti-fatigue mats and automation to enhance safety and prevent injuries.

### 10.4 Task rotation and break scheduling

Rotating workers between different tasks helps to reduce the risk of repetitive strain injuries. Ensure that workers are not continuously performing the same physical tasks for long periods of time.

Encourage regular breaks to prevent overuse of muscles. Short, frequent breaks are more effective in reducing discomfort than longer, less frequent ones.

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MSD research suggests that task rotation is more effective when intervals align with the specific physical demands of tasks. For example, job rotation should aim to evenly distribute physical workloads across different body parts to minimise strain. Rotating workers between high-repetition tasks and less demanding jobs allows for recovery, reducing fatigue and the risk of MSDs.

### 10.5 Strengthening and stretching programmes

Provide access to targeted strengthening and stretching programmes to support injury prevention. These programmes should focus on building resilience in key muscle groups and enhancing flexibility, helping workers maintain mobility and reducing the risk of strain or musculoskeletal injuries.

### 10.6 Early and/or on-site physiotherapy

Offer access to physiotherapy services to help address discomfort or pain before it worsens. Consider having a physiotherapist, occupational therapist or ergonomist on call or on site for consultations.

### 10.7 Occupational therapy

Occupational therapists focus on helping individuals perform daily tasks safely and effectively, especially in the workplace. Occupational therapists can assess job roles, identify musculoskeletal risks, and recommend adjustments to reduce strain and prevent injuries. They may suggest workstation modifications, posture corrections, or tools to support safe movement, making work environments healthier and more efficient.

### 10.8 Psychosocial intervention and coaching

Psychosocial intervention and coaching focuses on mental and social factors affecting worker wellbeing. By educating workers to recognise and report early signs of discomfort, these strategies foster open communication and a supportive culture, reducing injury risk and encouraging proactive health practices.

Businesses should explore integrating quick, on-the-job stretching exercises or relaxation techniques into their psychosocial support strategies. These practices could further help reduce the risk of MSDs associated with workplace stress.

## 11. Guidelines for communicating early notification and intervention to leaders and workers

### For leaders:

1. **Ongoing training:** Provide regular training sessions to help all leaders recognise early signs of discomfort or pain in workers, such as changes in posture, reduced range of motion, slower work pace, or verbal expressions of fatigue or pain. Train all leaders on how to foster open communication so workers feel comfortable sharing any discomfort.
2. **Empowerment:** Enable all leaders to take proactive steps by giving them the authority to make immediate adjustments to tasks, workstations, or schedules when a worker reports discomfort or pain.
3. **Lead by example:** Encourage all leaders to demonstrate the importance of self-care and early reporting. Leaders can speak openly about these practices in team meetings to reinforce a culture of proactive injury prevention.

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4. **Respond positively** to workers reporting discomfort or pain, work collaboratively with therapists to address safety risks promptly, and provide ongoing support by checking on progress regularly.

**For workers:**

1. **Safety briefings:** Integrate early notification processes into regular safety briefings. Highlight examples where early reporting successfully prevented injuries to demonstrate its benefits.
2. **Visual reminders:** Display clear, accessible posters in common areas reminding workers to report any discomfort or pain early, emphasising that early action can prevent more serious injuries.
3. **Foster peer support:** Encourage a culture of mutual care, where workers are not only aware of their own discomfort but are also encouraged to support and look out for each other. Workers should feel empowered to report signs of discomfort, whether for themselves or if they notice a colleague struggling.

Recovery time from discomfort or pain is significantly impacted by the frontline leader's response when a worker first reports discomfort or pain. Their attitude and actions play a crucial role in supporting positive outcomes.

Follow the **SUPPORT** principles:

- ✓ Show concern
- ✓ Understand their needs
- ✓ Promptly address discomfort
- ✓ Provide assistance as needed
- ✓ Offer encouragement to stay engaged
- ✓ Respect their experience
- ✓ Take proactive steps for a comfortable return

A supportive response reassures workers and promotes a faster recovery from discomfort.

An example of an early notification and intervention poster can be found in the appendices.

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## 12. Early intervention checklist for employers

We have provided a checklist in the appendix to help ensure that your organisation has systems and processes in place to support early intervention for physical discomfort or pain. Using the checklist enables employers to proactively support early intervention, helping to prevent discomfort from developing into more serious physical injuries.

## 13. Conclusion

In conclusion, early notification and intervention in cases of discomfort or pain are essential components of fostering a healthy and supportive workplace. By encouraging open communication and addressing issues promptly, businesses can reduce the risk of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), improve employee wellbeing, and enhance overall productivity.

Implementing good practices such as regular ergonomic assessments, proactive psychosocial support, and tailored training programmes not only helps identify and mitigate risks but also builds trust and engagement among employees. By prioritising these measures, organisations can create a culture of safety and care, ensuring that employees feel valued and empowered to report concerns without hesitation. Ultimately, a proactive approach to discomfort and pain management benefits both the workforce and the business, contributing to long-term success and resilience.

## 14. Acknowledgements

ShopCare extends its gratitude to our strategic partner, **ACC**, whose support enables us to deliver meaningful value. We also thank **our Advisory Group** and the businesses that contributed to developing this guidance. Your commitment plays an essential role in helping workplaces across New Zealand prevent and reduce musculoskeletal discomfort, pain and injuries, fostering safer and healthier work environments.

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## 15. Appendix

### Employee Frequently Asked Questions

#### 1. What is early notification of discomfort or pain?

Early notification involves workers reporting any signs of physical discomfort or pain, such as muscle soreness, joint pain, or tingling, before they develop into an injury.

#### 2. Why is early notification and intervention important?

Early treatment of discomfort or pain prevents it from worsening and ensures the right treatment is provided for a quicker recovery.

#### 3. Who is physiotherapy not suitable for?

- Individuals with non-work-related injuries, such as those from personal activities (e.g., sports or gardening).
- Temporary workers employed by external labour agencies.
- Workers with existing ACC claims for the same condition.
- Workers requiring urgent medical attention due to severe pain levels.

#### 4. Is my medical information shared with my leader?

No, all medical information shared with the physiotherapist remains confidential. After your appointment, your immediate leader could/will receive a summary from the physiotherapist with information on the cause of your discomfort or pain and any recommended workplace adjustments to support your recovery.

#### 5. What happens after my initial physiotherapy appointment?

The physiotherapist will assess the cause of your discomfort or pain and discuss treatment recommendations to prevent recurrence. If additional treatment is advised, a follow-up appointment will be scheduled. You may have up to three physiotherapy sessions. If further treatment is needed beyond this, the physiotherapist may refer you to a medical doctor or assist to initiate an ACC claim if appropriate.

#### 6. Do I need to pay for my physiotherapy appointments?

Normally no. Speak to your employer, they could potentially cover the full cost of physiotherapy treatments to prevent an injury and support your recovery journey.

#### 7. How long are the physiotherapy appointments?

Appointments typically last 30-45 minutes to allow the physiotherapist sufficient time to address your discomfort and provide stretching or exercise recommendations for recovery.

#### 8. Must I schedule my appointment outside working hours?

Whenever possible, appointments will be arranged during work hours. However, in some cases, you may be asked to attend outside of regular working hours to ensure timely treatment. If your appointment falls within work hours, inform your leader before you leave and upon return.

#### 9. What if I'm not sure if my discomfort or pain is work-related?

If you're uncertain, discuss your symptoms with your immediate leader or health and safety representative. They can help determine if physiotherapy treatment is appropriate for your situation.



# Notice any discomfort or pain recently?

## Stop the task you are busy with

Why? Ignoring the signs could worsen the discomfort and lead to injury.

# 1

## Don't wait. Report it ASAP!

Inform your immediate leader right away. Together, we can assess and address your discomfort or pain immediately.

# 2

## Get treatment

Work with your immediate leader to determine the appropriate treatment response.

# 3

## Record the discomfort or pain

Document the discomfort or pain and actions taken. This will help with any adjustments and support proactive measures to prevent future experiences.

# 4

## Stay connected

Keep your immediate leader updated on your recovery progress. Ongoing communication is essential to support full recovery.

# 5

**Early notification and intervention of discomfort or pain.**

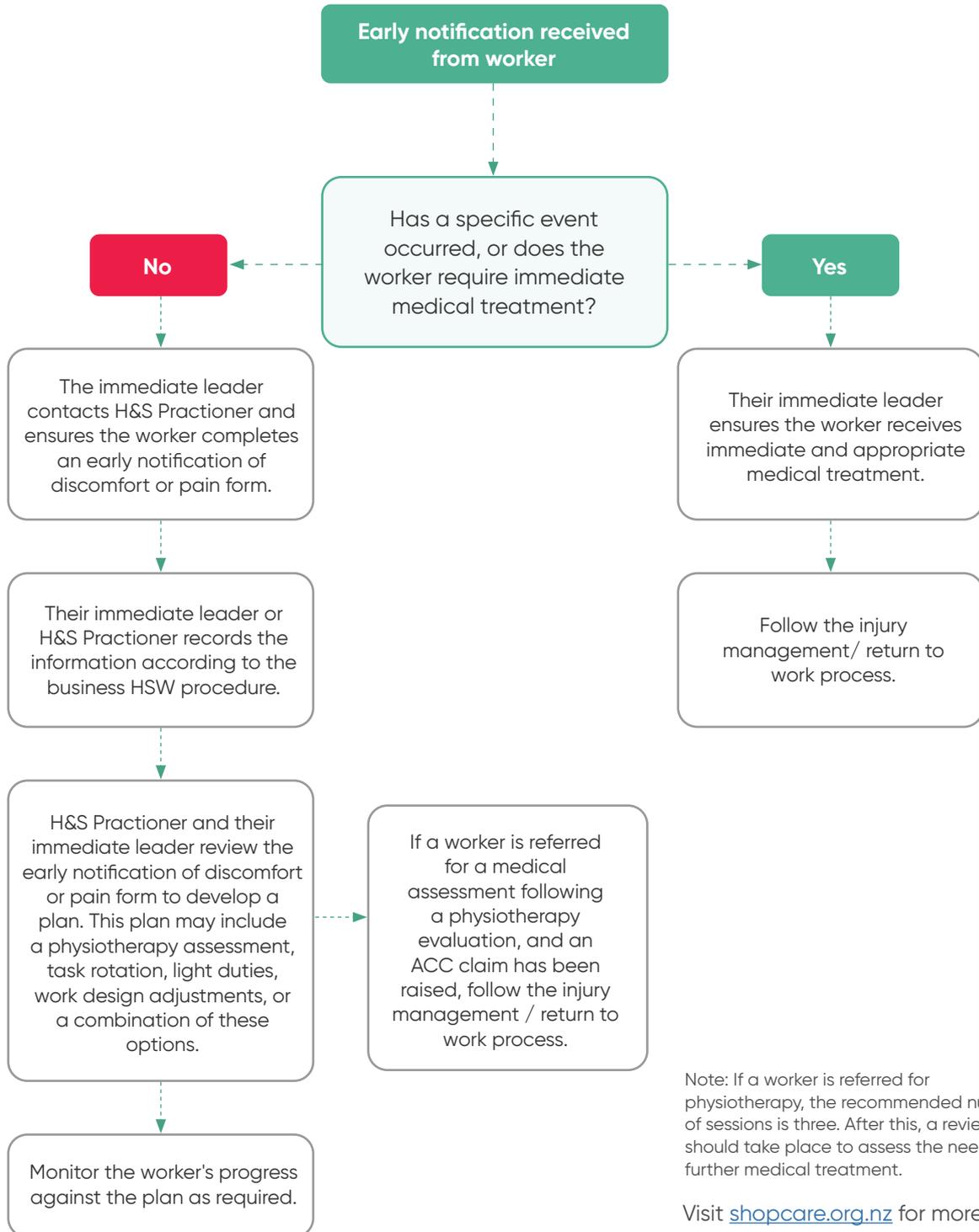
Visit [shopcare.org.nz](https://shopcare.org.nz) for more helpful resources.



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# Early intervention of discomfort or pain: flowchart

Refer to the flowchart to decide the appropriate treatment route to follow.



Note: If a worker is referred for physiotherapy, the recommended number of sessions is three. After this, a review should take place to assess the need for further medical treatment.

Visit [shopcare.org.nz](http://shopcare.org.nz) for more helpful resources.

# Early intervention of discomfort or pain: reporting form



**Most muscle discomfort or pain is harmless and usually resolves on its own. It may not be related to work or a specific injury, but addressing discomfort or pain early is the best approach for managing it effectively.**

Please complete this form if you are experiencing discomfort or pain and submit it to your immediate leader or supervisor. If your discomfort or pain is the result of a specific incident at work, please fill out an incident / injury report.

Full name:

Job title:

Signature:

Today's date:

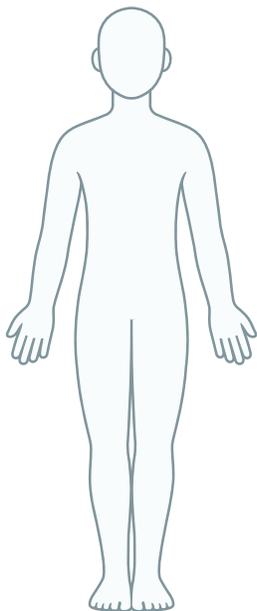
DD / MM / YYYY

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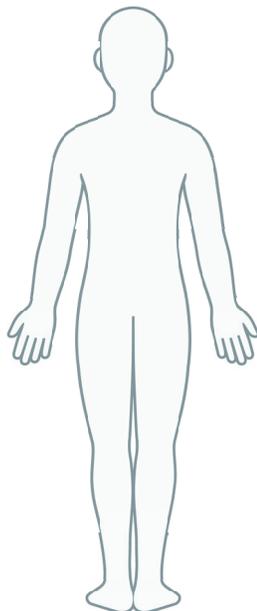
Describe the discomfort or pain you're experiencing:

**Mark on the figures below where you feel achy or sore, and rate how sore you're feeling.**

FRONT BODY



BACK BODY



LEFT HAND



RIGHT HAND



How severe is your pain?

- Discomfort
- Mild pain
- Pain
- Severe pain

How often do you suffer from pain?

- Less than once a week
- A few times a week
- At least once a day
- Always have some pain

When did you first notice the discomfort or pain?

Describe what it felt like initially and what you were doing when you first experienced it:

Have you experienced this issue before? If so, provide description and when was the last occurrence?

Do you think any of the following are causing, or adding to, your discomfort or pain? (mark all that apply)

<b>Workplace risks:</b>	<b>Environmental and organisational challenges:</b>	<b>Personal health factors:</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> Awkward postures while working	<input type="checkbox"/> The pace of work	<input type="checkbox"/> General health
<input type="checkbox"/> Repetitive tasks	<input type="checkbox"/> Lack of correct equipment	<input type="checkbox"/> Fitness level
<input type="checkbox"/> Over-reaching	<input type="checkbox"/> Weather conditions	<input type="checkbox"/> Stress
<input type="checkbox"/> Vibrations	<input type="checkbox"/> Lack of control over your work	<input type="checkbox"/> Activities outside of work
<input type="checkbox"/> Heavy lifting	<input type="checkbox"/> Not enough workers	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify):
<input type="checkbox"/> Working overhead	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor work relationships	
<input type="checkbox"/> Working bent over	<input type="checkbox"/> Congested or limited space	
<input type="checkbox"/> Temperatures		

At what time of day is the discomfort or pain most noticeable?

Does the discomfort or pain occur outside the workplace? If so, where?

What activities do you participate in outside of work (e.g., sports, clubs, hobbies)?

What are you doing to manage your discomfort or pain?

<input type="checkbox"/> Pain relief medication	<input type="checkbox"/> Medical treatment	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify):
<input type="checkbox"/> Stretches	<input type="checkbox"/> Exercises	
<input type="checkbox"/> Pacing myself at work	<input type="checkbox"/> Keeping active in general	
<input type="checkbox"/> Rest	<input type="checkbox"/> Changing the way I do things	
<input type="checkbox"/> Warming up before work		

Additional comments:

Once completed, please pass this to your leader/supervisor to review together.

For employers (select all that apply):

<input type="checkbox"/> Spoke to worker	<input type="checkbox"/> Conducted workplace ergonomics assessment
<input type="checkbox"/> Provided self-help information	<input type="checkbox"/> Agreed to follow up
<input type="checkbox"/> Provided appropriate medical treatment	<input type="checkbox"/> Reviewed tasks
<input type="checkbox"/> Addressed contributing factors	<input type="checkbox"/> No further action required
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify):	

Additional employer comments:

I have reviewed this form with my employee:

Leader signature:

Date:

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DD / MM / YYYY

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*If follow-up is required:*

Leader signature:

Date:

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DD / MM / YYYY

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Visit [shopcare.org.nz](http://shopcare.org.nz) for more helpful resources.



# Early intervention of discomfort or pain: checklist for employers

This checklist helps ensure that your organisation has systems and processes in place to support early intervention for physical discomfort or pain.

## 1. Leadership commitment

- Executive endorsement of an early intervention policy that clearly defines objectives, roles, and stakeholder expectations.
- Review of relevant policies to ensure they align with the early intervention approach, supporting workers in remaining at or returning to work after absence.
- Early intervention and injury management included as standing items on executive meeting agendas.

## 2. Systems review and improvement

- Established systems for reporting and investigating incidents to support early intervention, including tools that monitor activity and alert management.
- Regular review of contracts with external providers, such as approved workplace rehabilitation providers, to ensure consistency with the early intervention policy.
- Ongoing resources, training, and support provided for leaders and rehabilitation managers.
- Management systems for early intervention are regularly reviewed and updated as needed.

## 3. Accountability

- Systems in place to ensure leaders are accountable for managing and preventing injury, with accountability embedded in the performance management framework.

## 4. Information and training

- Information provided to workers on available support, reporting, and contact procedures in case of early notification of discomfort or pain, or injury, including details on rehabilitation services.
- Training for leaders to build confidence and capability in recognising early signs of physical discomfort or pain and supporting workers at risk of injury.
- Clear communication with rehabilitation and treatment providers on the early intervention approach and the importance of assessments to address risks of long-term absence from work.

## 5. Incentives

- Recognition and reward for good performance on proactive injury prevention practices.

This checklist enables employers to proactively support early intervention, helping to prevent discomfort from developing into more serious physical injuries.

Visit [shopcare.org.nz](https://shopcare.org.nz) for more helpful resources.

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## 16. References

- **WorkSafe New Zealand**

Work-related musculoskeletal disorders

<https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/dmsdocument/57576-work-related-musculoskeletal-disorders-definitions-review/latest>

- **Australian Government/ Comcare**

Early intervention service pilot:

<https://www.comcare.gov.au/about/forms-pubs/docs/publications/research/early-intervention-service-pilot-evaluation-factsheet.pdf>

- **OSHWIKI networking knowledge**

Early intervention for musculoskeletal disorders among the working population

<https://oshwiki.osha.europa.eu/en/themes/early-intervention-musculoskeletal-disorders-among-working-population>

- **Monash University**

Early intervention in the workers compensation process.

[https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-](https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-04/early_intervention_in_the_workers_compensation_process_-_final_report.pdf)

[04/early\\_intervention\\_in\\_the\\_workers\\_compensation\\_process\\_-\\_final\\_report.pdf](https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-04/early_intervention_in_the_workers_compensation_process_-_final_report.pdf)



### Transforming health, safety and wellbeing outcomes for the New Zealand retail sector and its supply chain.

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# Ngā mihi

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