

A woman with glasses and a yellow shirt is sitting in an office, talking on a mobile phone. She has her hand on her neck, suggesting discomfort. In the background, there is a bookshelf and a window with a potted plant.

## Addressing the hidden driver of higher musculoskeletal costs for employers.

The Mental Health Index by TELUS Health recently found that nearly one in six (15%) Canadian workers have a physical health issue which interferes with their work<sup>1</sup>. Musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions in Canada are the leading cause of disability<sup>2</sup> and is one of the main causes of early retirement<sup>3</sup>.

MSK conditions are injuries or disorders which commonly include back/neck conditions, osteoarthritis, tendonitis and other issues. Notably, MSK conditions are associated with the greatest economic burden of disease, costing the Canadian economy around \$22 billion every year. While direct costs such as those related to the provision of health services (e.g., hospital visits, prescription drugs) only make up around one-quarter of the overall costs of disease burden, the remaining three-quarters of the costs are actually indirect costs such as those associated with work absence or loss of earnings<sup>4</sup>. It is therefore important for organizations to establish effective programs to support their employees suffering from MSK conditions.

## MSK and co-occurring mental health conditions.

The co-occurrence of more than one health condition in the same person (i.e., comorbidity) is rising globally<sup>5</sup>. Research has shown that suffering from a MSK condition increases the risk of developing a co-occurring mental health condition.

- The self-reported mental health of Canadian workers reporting a physical issue which interferes with their work is much lower than that of workers who do not report a physical health issue interfering with work, and that of the national average<sup>1</sup>.
- One in four people with a MSK condition also suffer from a mental health condition<sup>6</sup>. For example, more than 20% of men and up to 33% of women with arthritis also experience depression<sup>7</sup>.
- Suffering from comorbidities often results in worse clinical outcomes, lower treatment adherence, greater complications, and delayed recovery<sup>8</sup>.

The physical pain and changes in daily functioning capacity associated with a MSK condition can be a source of stress, lower levels of overall wellbeing, and reduce quality of life, which often results in lasting consequences on one's mental health.

## The impact on work absence.

MSK conditions are typically one of the top two drivers of work disability absence of several weeks to months. It is also a driver of frequent incidental (1-2 day) absences. This situation is only intensified when there is a co-occurring mental health condition. Indeed, the interaction between MSK conditions and co-occurring mental health conditions results in higher costs and predicts the risk of absence from work.

- People with a MSK condition and comorbid depression have 29% — 34% higher total healthcare costs as compared to people with only a MSK condition<sup>9</sup>.
- The interaction between greater symptoms of depression and MSK pain are associated with a higher likelihood of long-term sickness absence<sup>10</sup>.
- When back/neck pain is comorbid with psychological distress, the risk of absenteeism is 33% higher and the risk of presenteeism is 4.2 times higher<sup>11</sup>.
- Workers suffering from both MSK and mental health conditions lose more than twice as much work hours than workers suffering from only a MSK condition<sup>12</sup>.



with a MSK condition **also suffers from a mental health condition.**



**work hours lost** for workers with both MSK and mental health conditions compared to workers with MSK only.



**working days:** average reduction per case when people suffering from MSK have EAP counselling prior to disability.

Lost productivity is one of the key drivers of costs when suffering from only a MSK condition. However, the higher costs associated with MSK conditions and co-occurring with mental health conditions include higher health benefits use, sick pay, replacements costs and associated management time.

## The importance of mental health support.

Mental health support positively influences work capacity for employees with co-occurring MSK and mental health conditions.

- People with a MSK condition who had EAP counselling prior to disability had an average reduction of 17 working days per case<sup>12</sup>.
- Psychological support over the course of the return-to-work process can reduce the number of sickness absences for workers with a MSK condition<sup>13</sup>.

Psychological interventions can have a protective effect on workers with a MSK condition, and reduce the duration of disability claims. Mental health support is therefore an essential treatment component for physical-mental comorbidities and may significantly reduce long-term costs for employers.



## What can leaders and organizations do to treat rising comorbidities?

- Recognize that the pain and life disruptions associated with MSK conditions increases the risk of mental distress and ensure that your disability management process includes a referral for counselling.
- Promote the use of [EAP](#) to employees dealing with any chronic health condition, as mental health comorbidity is not exclusive to MSK conditions.
- Consider integrating structured cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and mindfulness-based interventions such as [AbilitiCBT Pain Management and Adjustment to Change programs](#) as part of stay-at-work and return-to-work programs. These interventions are clinically effective psychological treatments ideal for mental health conditions and co-occurring MSK pain.

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