



# NEWS RELEASE

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## Lighten the load - tackling musculoskeletal disorders

**Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are the most common work-related health problem in Europe, affecting millions of workers. Across the EU27, 25% of workers complain of backache and 23% report muscular pains.**

MSDs are caused mainly by manual handling, frequent bending and twisting, heavy physical work and whole-body vibration. The risk of MSDs can increase with the pace of work, low job satisfaction, high job demands and job stress. There is also a strong interrelation between nervous and muscular systems: MSDs affect other aspects of workers' health, and other health conditions can trigger MSDs. MSDs are the biggest cause of absence from work in practically all Member States. In some states, 40% of the costs of workers' compensation are caused by MSDs, and up to 1.6% of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the country itself. They reduce company profitability and add to the social costs of the government.

Many problems can be prevented or greatly reduced through employers complying with existing safety and health law and following good practice. However, there are specific actions that have to be taken if MSDs are to be tackled effectively.

Lighten the load, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work's 2007 campaign to tackle MSDs in the workplace, supports an integrated management approach with three key elements. First, employers, employees and government need to work together to tackle MSDs. Secondly, any actions should address the 'whole load on the body', which covers all the stresses and strains being placed on the body, environmental factors such as cold working conditions, and the load being carried. Thirdly, employers need to manage the retention, rehabilitation and return to work of employees with MSDs.

Announcing the launch of Lighten the load in Brussels EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities Vladimír Špidla said: *'Tackling MSDs is a priority for the EU if we are to create more and better jobs in Europe. Given the demographic change, people will probably have to work longer and this makes it even more imperative that we tackle this problem now. It is essential if*



*European workers are to enjoy not only better quality jobs but a better quality of life and a higher standard of living. We can increase productivity and therefore prosperity in the EU if we manage to improve the situation of days lost to MSDs'.*

The price of MSDs to workers, employers and governments is huge. For the employee, they cause personal suffering and loss of income; for the employer, they reduce business efficiency; and for the government, they increase social security costs.

‘There is a strong correlation between workers’ health, wellbeing and quality of work on the one hand, and economic prosperity,’ says Jukka Takala, Director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work. ‘Although weekly working hours are decreasing, the pace of work is increasing.

Painful or tiring positions, working at very high speeds and to tight deadlines and the increasing use of machinery and computers result in high levels of work-related MSDs and stress. For these reasons, there is a need to implement prevention strategies and programmes to combat staff health problems.

These strategies must place the worker at the centre of organisational changes and redesign of the workplace.

Lighten the load culminates with the European Week for Safety and Health at Work from 22 to 26 October 2007, with a range of activities and events across Europe.

The campaign also features the Good Practice Awards which recognise organisations that have made outstanding and innovative contributions to tackle MSDs. The Agency will announce the winners at the campaign's closing event in March 2008.

For more information, see the campaign website at <http://ew2007.osha.europa.eu/>

Ends

**Press enquiries:**

A comprehensive information pack is available at:

<http://ew2007.osha.europa.eu/infopack/>

For information about national activities please contact our Focal Points' Network. The complete contact list is available at:

<http://ew2007.osha.europa.eu/nationalcontactsandactivities>



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#### Notes to editors:

1. The **European Agency for Safety and Health at Work** was set up by the European Union to help meet the information needs in the field of occupational safety and health. Based in Bilbao, Spain, the Agency aims to improve the lives of people at work by stimulating the flow of technical, scientific and economic information between all those involved in occupational safety and health issues.
2. **Lighten the load** is the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work's 2007 campaign to tackle MSDs in the workplace. It is backed by the EU Presidencies of Germany and Portugal in 2007, the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European social partners.
3. **Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)** are impairments of the bodily structures such as muscles, joints, tendons, ligaments and nerves, or localised blood circulation systems that are caused or aggravated primarily by the performance of work and by the effects of the immediate environment where the work is carried out.
4. The campaign follows a decentralised model: the Agency coordinates campaign activities, provides information in 22 languages and via the campaign website, organises **Good Practice Awards** and the **Closing Event in March 2008**; national Focal Points in each of the 27 EU Member States promote, stimulate and organise activities at national level. The dual objectives of the campaign are to **increase awareness of risks** and to **promote good practice solutions**.



5. Lighten the load culminates with the **European Week for Safety and Health at Work from 22 to 26 October 2007**, with a range of activities and events across Europe. The European Week is an annual information campaign designed to raise awareness and help make Europe a safer and healthier place to work.

6. Labour inspectorates in the EU have launched an inspection and communication campaign to prevent lower back disorders, targeting the transport and healthcare sectors. The main focus is on lower back disorders which result from the manual handling of loads. In addition to distributing information, the campaign also includes wide-ranging in-company inspections carried out by national labour inspectorates. The campaign is a European initiative organised by the **Senior Labour Inspectorates Committee (SLIC)**, and SLIC fully supports the Lighten the load campaign.