

For information on
24 August 2021

Legislative Council Panel on Manpower

Prevention of Health Hazards associated with Standing at Work

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the measures and enforcement work undertaken by the Labour Department (“LD”) in preventing health hazards associated with standing at work.

Potential health hazards associated with standing at work

2. Many employees in Hong Kong are often required to stand at work. Some of them have restricted movement during work, such as those engaged in cashier work at retail shops or fast food restaurants, or customer service counter work in other service industries, and the employees would spend more time working in a fixed standing posture due to lack of leg movement. They are more prone to muscle ache and fatigue, and have their legs stressed if appropriate preventive measures are not taken. Frequent stress on legs is associated with various kinds of lower limb musculoskeletal disorders (“MSDs”).

3. There are many causative factors for lower limb MSDs. In addition to work factors, they also include many personal health factors such as ageing, overweight, domestic work, and history of lower limb injury or disease. In respect of work factors, LD strives to assist employers and employees in reducing relevant hazards at work and taking appropriate preventive measures to reduce the risk of employees contracting such kind of diseases with a view to safeguarding the health of employees.

Promotion of preventive measures

4. LD has been attaching importance to the occupational health of employees who are required to frequently stand at work. Different means and channels, such as organising health talks, distributing health guides on standing at work and publications on lower limb disorders, publishing feature articles in newspapers, etc., were adopted to strengthen the awareness of employers and

employees on preventing the relevant occupational hazards, and to remind them of making appropriate work and rest break arrangements to reduce the risks posed by prolonged standing to employees' health.

Production of guidance notes

5. To further safeguard employees against the health hazards associated with standing at work, LD issued the “Guidance Notes on Standing at Work and Service Counter Design” (“GN”) in December 2018. In addition to setting out the possible health hazards which may arise from standing at work and the necessary risk assessment and preventive measures, the GN emphasises that employers must, so far as reasonably practicable, provide suitable work chairs or chairs for occasional resting at the working locations to the employees who are engaged in standing work with restricted movement. The GN also provides recommendations on service counter design. Besides, LD has been broadcasting television and radio Announcements in the Public Interest since November 2019 to remind employers to provide these employees with chairs and arrange sitting breaks to reduce the health risks of standing work.

6. LD has also widely publicised the GN to relevant employers and employees since its issue. From January 2019 to July 2021, LD conducted promotional visits to 100 large corporations including those in the retail industry, catering industry, property management industry and hotel industry. We explained the requirements of the new GN to the management of these corporations, urged them to formulate or refine the company policy to strengthen protection of employees from the health risks caused by standing work through a top-down, holistic and unified approach, in order to comply with the new GN.

7. In addition to promotional meetings with the management, LD also conducted subsequent field inspections to the workplaces of these corporations to follow up on the implementation of good work practices and provide suggestions for improvement when necessary. According to the findings of the field inspections, a vast majority of the 100 large corporations had taken a number of preventive measures after the promotion visits to comply with the requirements of the new GN. They include using the risk assessment checklist in the GN for risk assessment and keeping the records, providing chairs at or near the working locations for employees, and implementing appropriate auxiliary measures, such as arranging job rotation, arranging appropriate rest breaks, reminding employees to wear suitable shoes, explaining to employees about the health risks posed by standing work and the preventive measures, etc.

Inspection and enforcement work

8. Apart from promotional visits, LD also conducts surprise inspections of workplaces of the retail industry, catering industry, property management industry, hotel industry, etc., that involve standing work. Corresponding enforcement actions will be taken if employers are found to have failed to take appropriate measures in accordance with the new GN, including taking out prosecution against non-compliant employers where there is sufficient evidence.

9. In 2019 and 2020, LD conducted 281 and 69 inspections targeting at standing work, and issued 18 and 8 warnings respectively. The warnings mainly concerned failure to provide chairs to employees and failure to suitably arrange employees to take rest by sitting. In the first half of 2021, LD conducted 76 inspections and issued one warning. The warning also involved the employer's failure to provide chairs to employees and failure to suitably arrange employees to take sitting rest.

Clinical consultation service

10. Employees who suspect that they have contracted lower limb MSDs arising from standing work can make an appointment in the two occupational health clinics of LD for consultation. Apart from providing diagnostic and treatment services, the medical and nursing staff will also enquire about the details of employees' work, explain the health risks involved and advise them on corresponding preventive measures to reduce their chance of getting lower limb MSDs.

Analysis of cases with lower limb MSDs

11. Since July 2018, LD has been collecting detailed information on new cases seeking consultation for lower limb MSDs, including nature of the diseases, work and non-work related risk factors, in order to understand more about the characteristics and circumstances of the cases. From July 2018 to December 2020, a total of 926 new patients presented with lower limb MSDs, and more than half of them (60%) were aged between 50 and 64. A majority of the patients (584 cases) were female (63%). The patients came from a wide range of occupations. About 10% of them were protective services workers, 10% were cleaners and helpers, and 8% were personal care workers in health services. The most common diagnoses were joint pain (37%), plantar fasciitis (33%) and non-specific limb pain (13%).

12. LD observed from these new cases that patients with lower limb MSDs were from different occupations. There was not any predominant occupation in terms of the number of cases. Long standing and walking time were the most common work-related factors associated with these cases. Regarding non-work related factors, the median age of the cases was 53, which is higher than that of the employees in Hong Kong overall (43). Ageing will increase the risk of lower limb MSDs. Moreover, most of the cases had other personal factors that increased their risk of lower limb MSDs, such as overweight or obesity, domestic work, and past history of injury or disease of the lower limbs.

13. When these patients attended the occupational health clinics, the medical and nursing staff will, in addition to arranging appropriate investigation, making diagnosis and prescribing treatment, provide suitable advice to individual patients with respect to their work and non-work related risk factors. This includes using tools like trolleys where appropriate to avoid carrying heavy objects and reduce stress on the lower limbs, organising work process flexibly and arranging suitable rest breaks, wearing suitable shoes at work and using insoles, etc. As for non-work related factors, the medical and nursing staff will encourage and teach the patients how to maintain healthy body weight through balanced diet and suitable level of exercises, prevent excessive stress on lower limbs when doing domestic work, avoid over-strenuous sport activities, have adequate rest, etc., to manage lower limb MSDs effectively.

Way forward

LD will continue to adopt the three-pronged strategy of publicity and promotion, education and training, as well as inspection and enforcement to actively facilitate employers and employees to prevent the health hazards associated with standing at work, to assist them in meeting the requirements of relevant guidelines and to ensure their compliance with occupational safety and health legislation, in order to safeguard employees' occupational health.

Labour and Welfare Bureau
Labour Department
August 2021