

BEYOND ERGONOMICS

# A guide to fostering workforce musculoskeletal health



# The hidden costs of chronic pain at work

The following story narrates what dealing with musculoskeletal (MSK) issues — conditions that affect the muscles, bones, joints, and connective tissues — feels like, and how it impacts colleagues and your company. It's a familiar tale, one that may resonate with you or someone you know, especially considering that MSK conditions affect more than half the population in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> This means a large number of your employees may be going through this right now — potentially leading to decreased productivity and increased health care costs.

*Your star employee, Tom, is quietly struggling with a nagging backache.<sup>2</sup> The constant discomfort is wearing him down, not just physically but also mentally. Stress and anxiety creep in, making it even harder to manage the pain.<sup>3</sup>*

*He's afraid to say anything, worried it might put his job at risk or be seen as lazy or complaining.<sup>4</sup> So he pushes through, but he's working at a fraction of his usual productivity.<sup>5</sup> The pain is relentless and over time seems to trigger other health issues.<sup>6</sup> His mood is low, and he's started to feel isolated, not just from his team but from friends and family.<sup>7</sup>*

*The financial toll is mounting, too. Tom is spending money out of pocket on over-the-counter medications, trying to find relief without drawing attention to his condition.*

*Without early intervention and support, his condition worsens. He doesn't just have back pain now; he has muscle tension, aching joints, and constant fatigue — ultimately leading to a point where he's forced to take an unexpected leave.*

*He needs more expensive treatments and leaves your team scrambling to find a replacement. But even when he takes time off to address his pain, the fear of returning to work and the pain cycle starting all over again is a heavy burden.<sup>8</sup>*

These MSK disorders can manifest as back pain, neck pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, arthritis, and other issues that impact an employee's quality of life and ability to work effectively.<sup>9</sup> How can we turn the tide on these debilitating conditions?



Recent research found that even if employees love their jobs, they might leave sooner than expected if they're dealing with persistent aches and pains.<sup>10</sup>



*Meet Tom, a fictional employee whose story mirrors the struggles of many facing chronic pain. Throughout this guide, we'll use his experiences to highlight the impact of MSK conditions at work.*

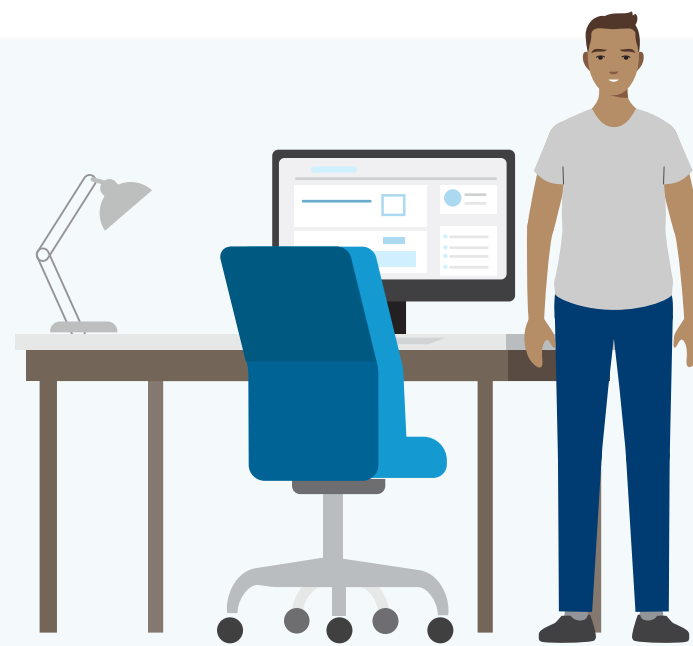
# Turning the tide on MSK challenges

MSK issues aren't just the number-one driver of chronic health care costs; they also lead to over 360 million missed workdays, \$297 billion in lost productivity each year, and even early retirement.<sup>11-14</sup> It's a ripple effect that impacts morale and your company's bottom line.

Many organizations recognize the need to invest in their employees' MSK health, but it can be tricky to know where to start.

That's why we created this guide. Inside, you'll find a phase 1-2-3 approach with practical strategies to address MSK issues head-on. We'll discuss everything from immediate solutions you can implement today to long-term plans that can create a lasting impact.

*Let's turn Tom's story into one of triumph. His experience will serve as a roadmap throughout this guide, demonstrating how simple changes and a supportive environment can make a difference. In the process, we'll help your entire workforce feel valued and healthy.*



# Navigating the path from prompt pain care to long-term health



## PHASE 1



### Immediate action

Evaluate, understand, and create an environment that addresses physical discomfort and pain, ensuring employees make the most of your company's current health benefits.

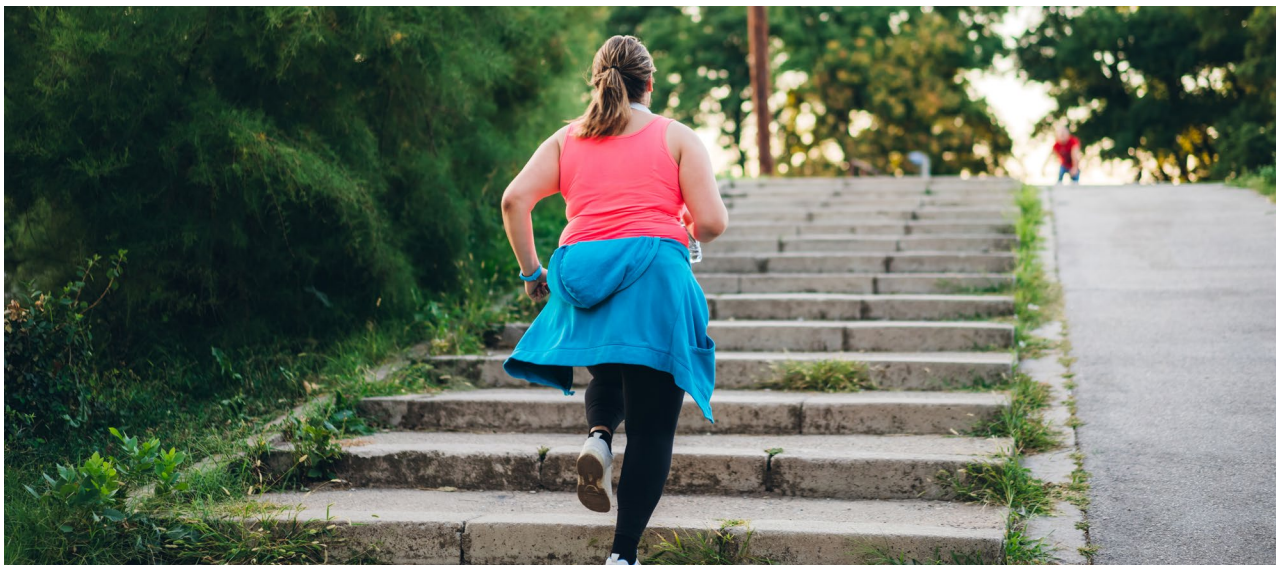


## PHASE 2

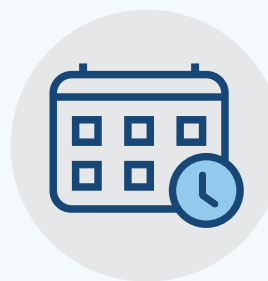


### Next steps

Equip leaders and employees with the tools to manage and prevent MSK conditions, and initiate a culture shift in how the workplace perceives and addresses MSK issues.



## PHASE 3



### Future considerations

Create long-term strategies for a workplace that prioritizes employee well-being and proactively manages health care costs.



## Immediate action

**Chronic pain is a reality for many employees, but one-third of them avoid speaking up due to fears of judgment, appearing weak, or losing their jobs.<sup>15</sup>**

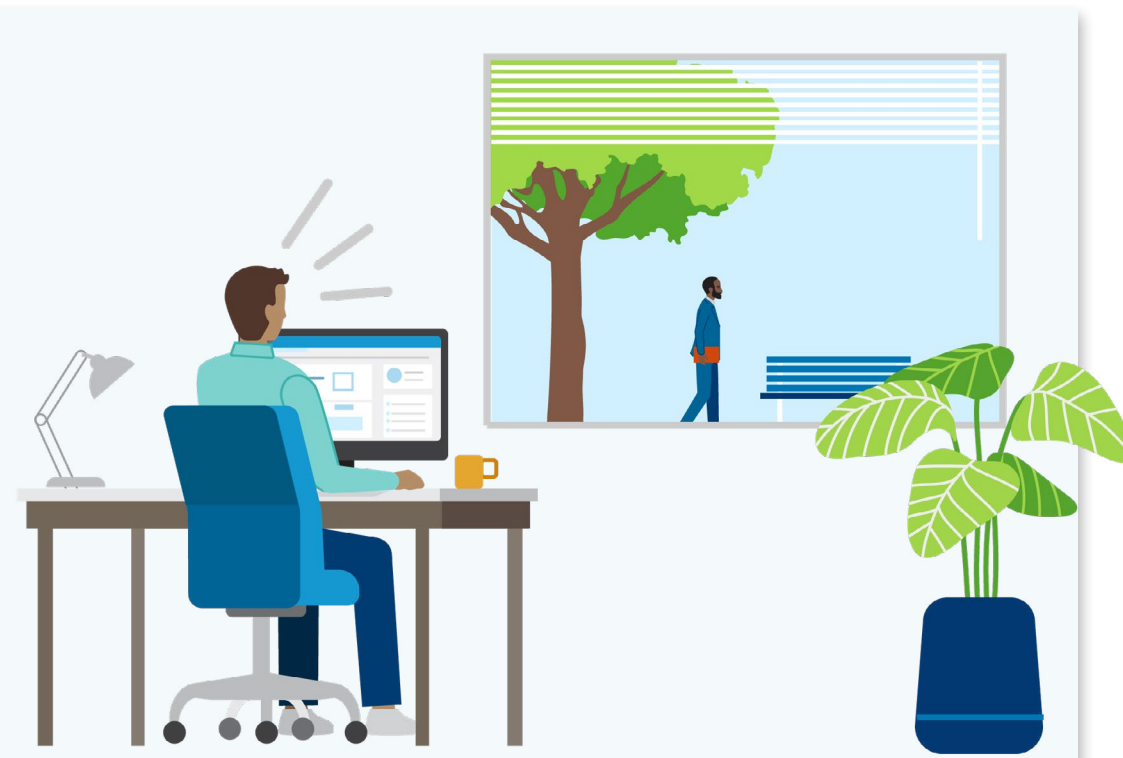
Many employees also don't know where to get help or what treatment options are available for managing MSK issues, which can lead to ineffective or unnecessary interventions.<sup>16</sup> In fact, research shows that 36% of MSK surgeries are avoidable, costing the workforce \$90 billion.<sup>17</sup>

**That's why this initial phase focuses on building trust, educating employees about their options, and maximizing your existing mental and physical health resources.**

### Start the conversation with empathy

Create opportunities for employees to comfortably share their discomfort and pain experiences with anonymous surveys, small group discussions, or 1:1 conversations.

*Observing his managers prioritize their own well-being could've given Tom the confidence to share his challenges more openly.<sup>19</sup>*



**Remember, avoid pressuring employees to disclose their pain.** It's easy to think, "If I just knew more, I could do more," especially if you're in a position to help, but everyone has different comfort levels about sharing health information.<sup>18</sup>

### See things through their eyes

Use open-ended prompts to encourage employees to share their experiences in their own words, like:

*"How does your work environment affect your physical comfort?"*

*"What challenges in your workspace might contribute to pain or discomfort?"*

*"What kind of support or resources would be most helpful to you?"*

### Maximize existing mental and physical health resources

Leveraging company support systems already in place can provide timely and effective relief for those experiencing discomfort or pain:

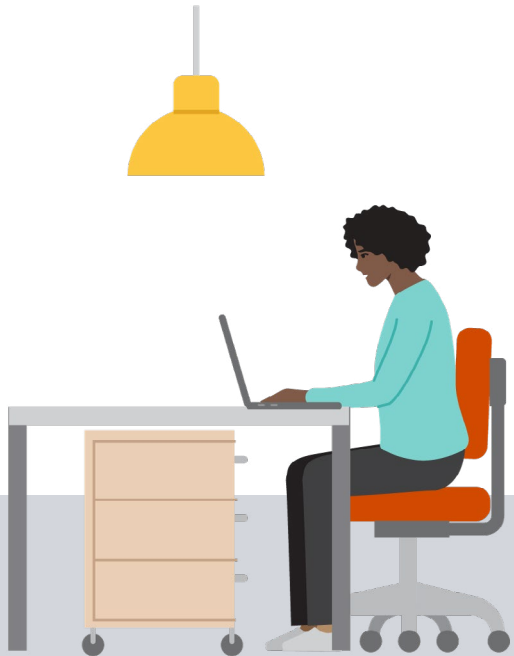
1. Develop a clear and accessible internal benefits guide that outlines all available health services your company already offers, including physical therapy coverage and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that offer counseling.
2. Explain how to access these benefits, including eligibility, coverage specifics, any reimbursements, and health provider contact information.
3. Distribute this internal benefits guide to all employees and make it easily accessible on the company intranet or employee portal. Consider hosting sessions with health care providers to discuss MSK health and answer employee questions.



# Immediate action continued

## Example ergonomic solutions

As individuals navigate different work settings, each environment presents unique challenges to MSK health. While the solutions may differ, one important principle applies to all: taking regular breaks.



Office

- Adjustable chairs with lumbar support
- Sit-stand desks
- Monitor arms or stands
- Ergonomic keyboards and mice
- Document holders



Construction

- Ergonomic hand tools
- Proper lifting technique training
- Ergonomic knee pads
- Back supports or braces
- Anti-vibration gloves
- Cycle workers through physically intensive tasks



Remote office

- Stipend for ergonomic equipment
- Home workstation guidelines
- Laptop stands and external keyboards
- Virtual ergonomic assessments
- Avoid non-ergonomic work setups, like in coffee shops



Warehouse

- Adjustable workbenches or tables
- Proper lifting techniques training
- Lifting aids (hand trucks, pallet jacks)
- Anti-fatigue mats
- Ergonomic gloves
- Rotate workers through physically demanding tasks



Classroom

- Adjustable desks and chairs
- Ergonomic writing tools
- Footrests



## Next steps

Building on the foundation of trust and open communication established in Phase 1, Phase 2 goes beyond assessments or simply providing information — it's about equipping your workforce to proactively manage their MSK condition while preventing the onset of new pain.

Think of it as creating a network of support within your company, where both managers and employees are empowered to take charge of their chronic pain and feel confident helping others do the same.

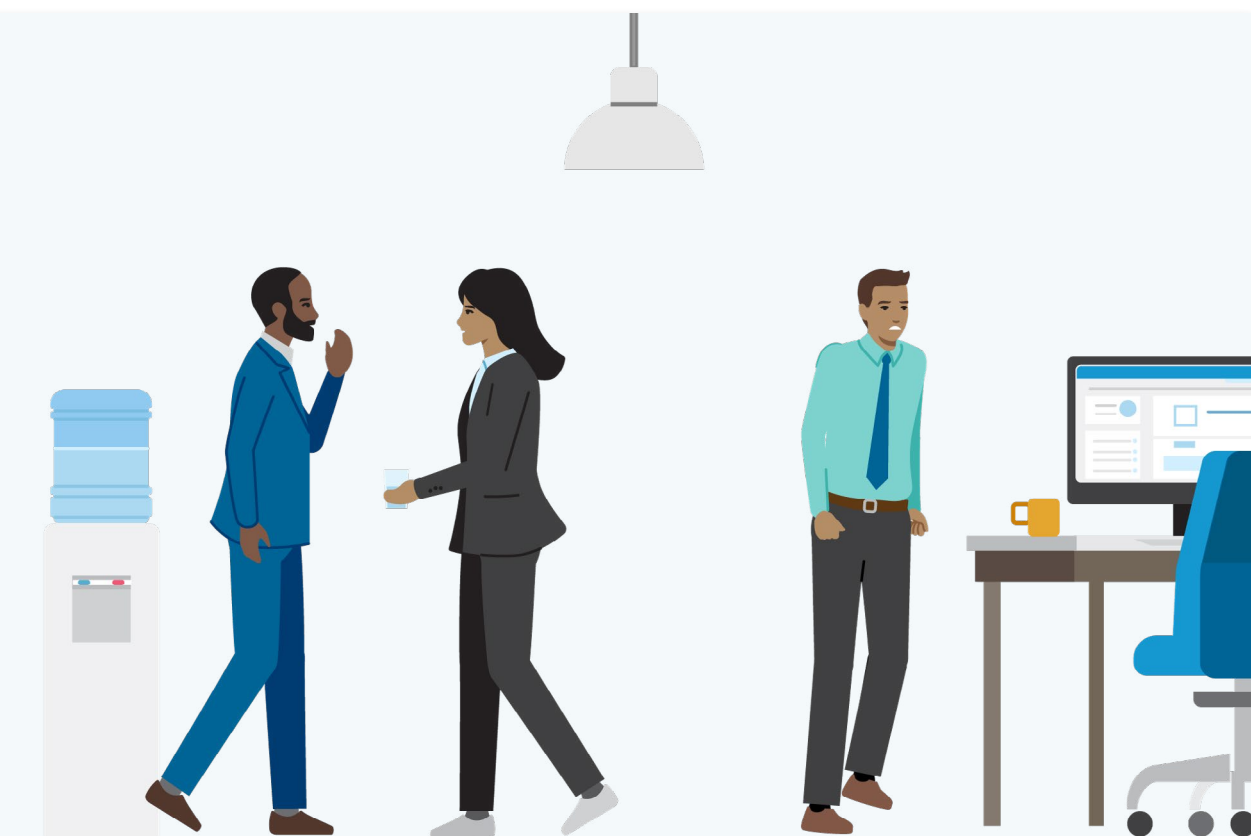
### Equip managers with the right tools and knowledge

- **On-the-ground insight:** Front-line supervisors are often the first to notice when an employee struggles, but they may need additional support to handle MSK-related situations effectively.<sup>20</sup>
- **MSK awareness training:** Provide managers with a basic understanding of common MSK issues, their impact on employees' work, and why early support and prevention are crucial. This can help them recognize potential problems and guide employees towards relevant resources.
- **MSK issues can sometimes flare up unexpectedly:** Work with managers to develop strategies for adapting to these situations, whether it's adjusting work schedules, reassigning tasks, or providing additional support.

### Encourage employees to take preventive action

- **Promote early detection:** Encourage employees to listen to their bodies and to recognize signs of pain or discomfort. If it continues, guide them to use the resources list you provided in Phase 1, and make sure they know it's okay to take time off to get the care they need. Emphasize that early intervention can prevent minor issues from turning into significant, more expensive problems down the road.<sup>22</sup>
- **Learn the basics:** Offer workshops or online resources to teach your employees about good posture, proper body mechanics, and lifting heavy objects safely. A little knowledge can go a long way in preventing injuries.
- **Manage stress:** Stress can make pain worse, and chronic pain from MSK injuries can also lead to increased stress.<sup>23</sup> Advocate for the use of company resources like mindfulness classes or counseling services. Promote self-care apps that provide 24/7 stress support, such as those available at no cost to Kaiser Permanente members.

*Tom's pain wasn't something others could see, and he worried his managers might not take it seriously. He also didn't want to be accused of faking it to get out of work.<sup>21</sup>*





## Next steps continued

### Building healthy habits

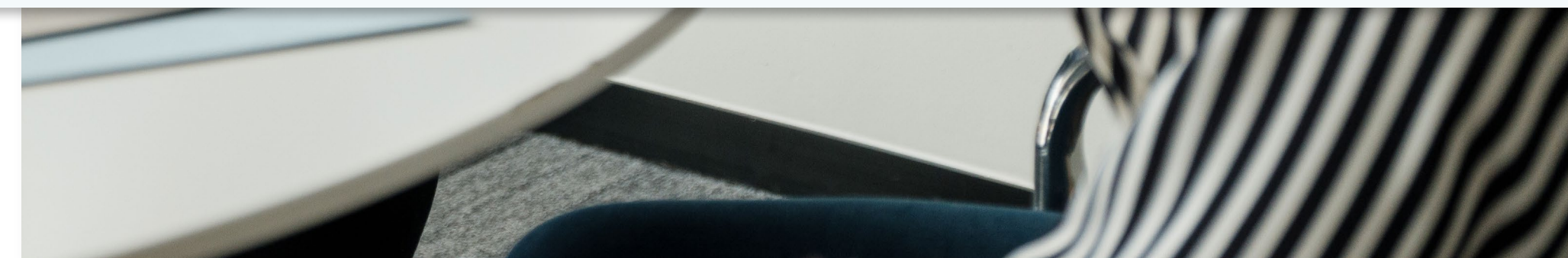
- **Empower employees to take ownership:** Invite them to reflect on what “feeling good” means to them at work. Is it reducing aches and pains? Boosting energy levels? Feeling stronger and more flexible? Help them identify their [personal goals](#) and realistic milestones to achieve them.
- **Introduce easy ways to incorporate habits into the workday:** Instead of sitting around a conference table, why not try a walking meeting?
- **Encourage regular movement:** Encourage employees to take breaks throughout the day to stretch, move around, and change positions.<sup>24</sup> This will help promote blood flow and reduce muscle fatigue.

### Help rebuild the confidence of employees returning from MSK-related absences:

- **A gradual return-to-work (RTW) plan:** This can include a reduced schedule, lighter duties, or even the option to work from home initially. The goal is to gradually increase their workload and responsibilities as they regain strength and confidence, ensuring their tasks align with their current recovery stage to prevent setbacks.
- **Designated case manager or HR representative:** This individual should be well-versed in MSK issues and able to offer both practical and emotional support. They can help employees navigate challenges, answer questions, and ensure they have the resources to succeed.
- **Regular check-ins:** Ask about their comfort levels, workload, and any pain or discomfort they may be experiencing. This open communication allows you to address any concerns promptly and adjust the RTW plan as needed.



Recognize that being away from work due to pain, and the pain itself, can make the notion of returning to work again overwhelming and frightening for employees.<sup>25</sup>





## Future considerations

Phases 1 and 2 were about building a solid foundation and empowering your team with prevention and management strategies. Now, let's look ahead and focus on creating an environment that promotes lasting health and well-being.

### Adapting work to support MSK health

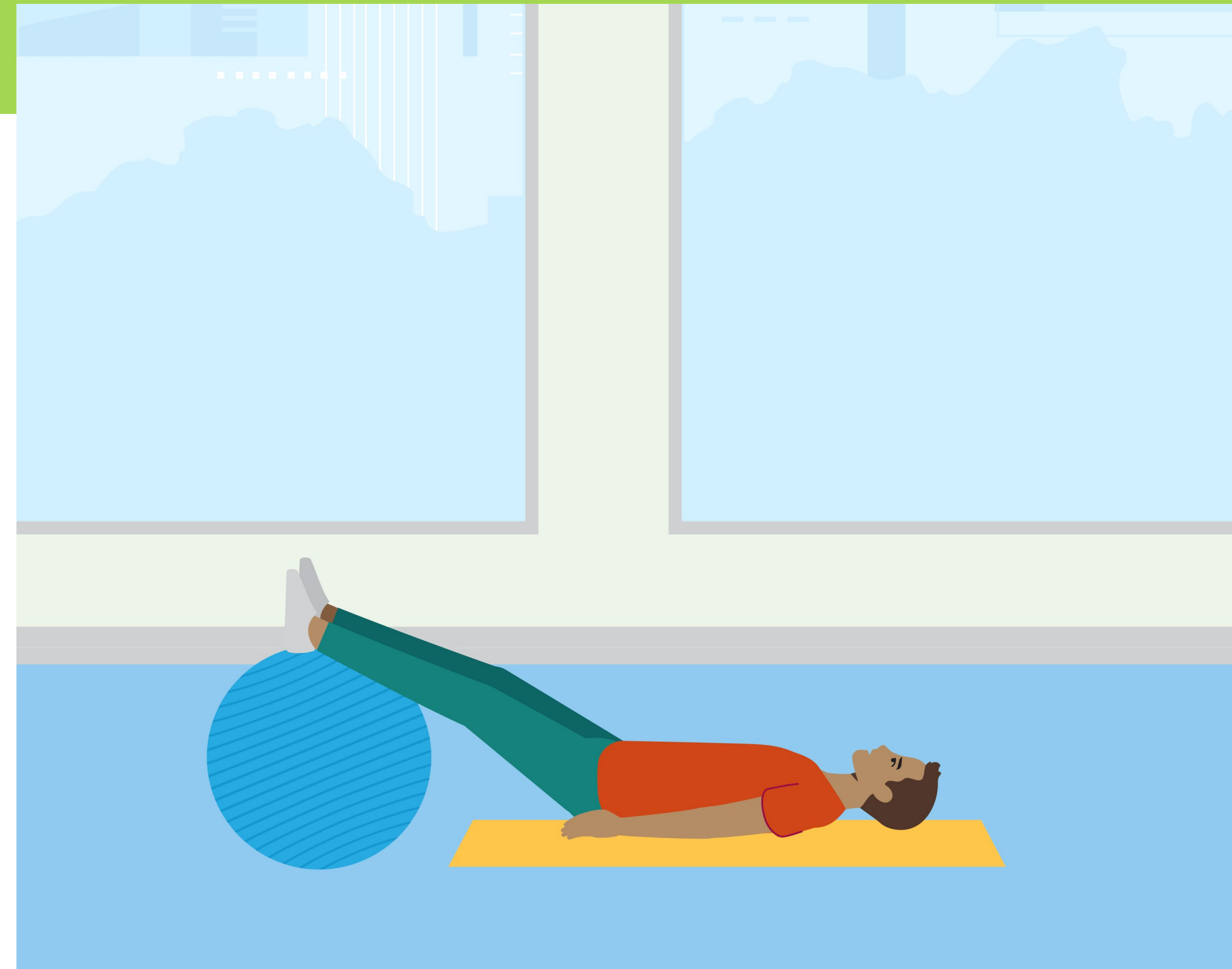
- **Take a closer look at physically demanding tasks:** By identifying these high-risk areas, you can explore alternative methods or equipment so these tasks are easier on the body.

***Examples:** Introduce flexible work arrangements like switching between sitting and standing, taking extra rest breaks, or modifying work schedules to accommodate doctor's appointments.*

- **Mix it up:** Repetitive tasks can be tough on the body.<sup>26</sup> Consider a job rotation program in which employees have the opportunity to do different tasks throughout the day, varying the muscles used to avoid strain.

### Elevate your wellness program

- **Partner with the pros:** Team up with health care providers, physical therapists, or occupational health specialists to create exercise and wellness programs tailored to your workforce's needs. This approach helps address the most common issues faced by your employees.
- **Show your commitment to well-being:** Offer incentives or reimbursements for participating in approved external wellness programs or using MSK health technology.



*To ease Tom's return, his manager introduced him to the Pomodoro Technique, a time-management method that breaks work into focused intervals (often 25 minutes) followed by short breaks. Tom, prioritizing his MSK health, adapted the technique to include stretching and movement during breaks — allowing him to gradually regain stamina while minimizing discomfort.*



## Future considerations continued

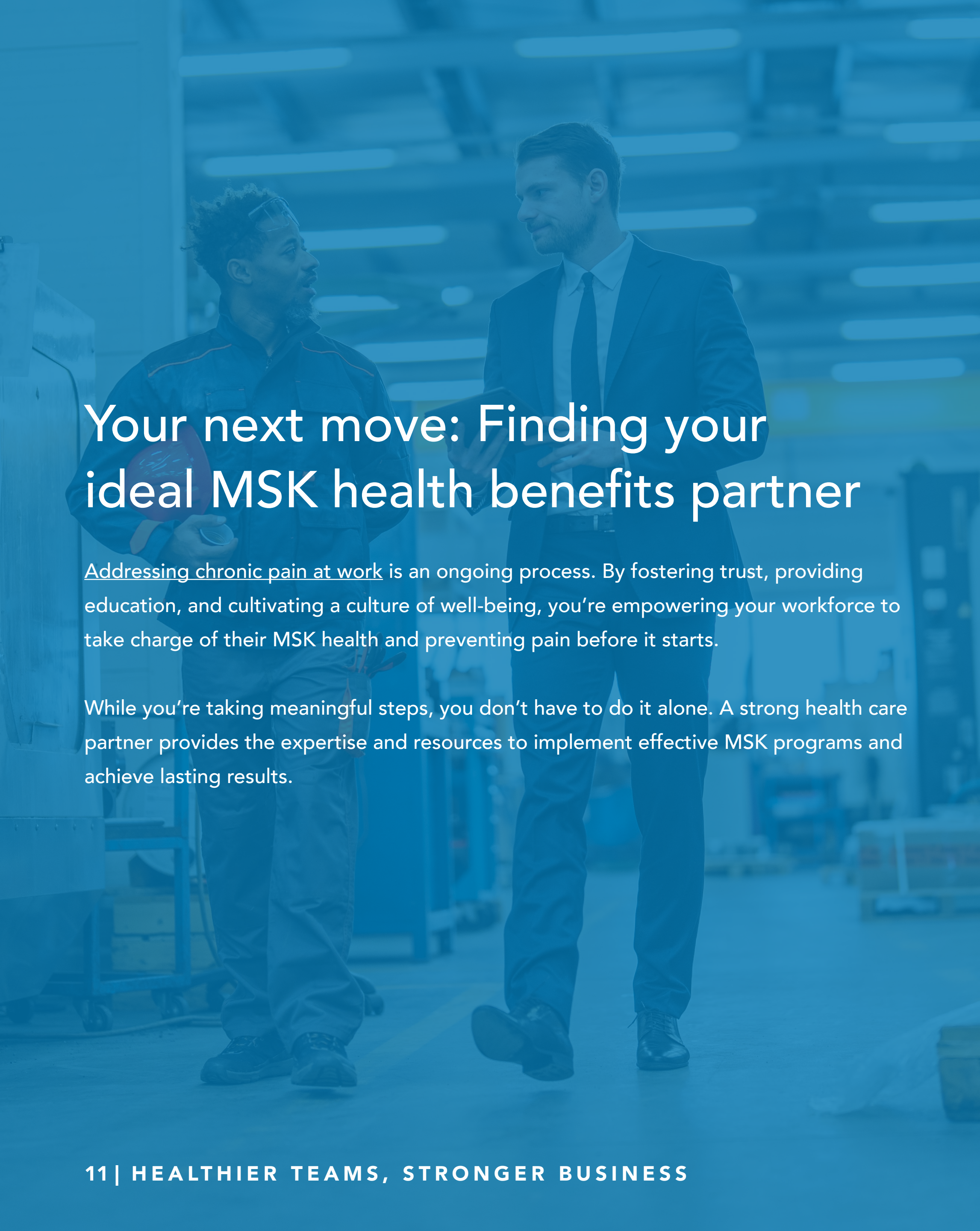
### Create a feedback loop

- **Keep communication lines open:** Your employees are the best source of information about their own needs and experiences. Regularly check in with them through surveys, focus groups, or casual conversations to see what's working and what could be improved.
- **Track your progress:** Keep an eye on key metrics like productivity levels and health care costs. These indicators will show you the positive effects of your efforts and help you identify areas for further improvement.
- **Celebrate success together:** Maybe a few team members are taking calls while on a walk or using equipment properly. Share those wins, big or small, to show that every effort matters.



Look into wearable devices that could support your team, such as those that use gentle vibrations to give real-time nudges when movements could lead to strain or injury.





# Your next move: Finding your ideal MSK health benefits partner

Addressing chronic pain at work is an ongoing process. By fostering trust, providing education, and cultivating a culture of well-being, you're empowering your workforce to take charge of their MSK health and preventing pain before it starts.

While you're taking meaningful steps, you don't have to do it alone. A strong health care partner provides the expertise and resources to implement effective MSK programs and achieve lasting results.

## CHECKLIST

### The essential questions to ask potential health care providers

- ☐ Does the provider offer a [well-rounded approach](#) that covers prevention, early intervention, and comprehensive treatment options?
- ☐ Are care options easy for employees to access? Look for providers that offer [virtual visits](#), in-person appointments, and even on-site services.
- ☐ Do they have a strong network of health care professionals who [work together seamlessly](#)? This ensures everyone is on the same page — sharing information and providing the best possible care, just like a well-coordinated team.
- ☐ Do they offer user-friendly apps or online resources to help employees track their progress, learn about their condition, and stay on top of their treatment plan?
- ☐ Do they prioritize physical therapy and other non-invasive treatments before considering more invasive measures?
- ☐ Do they integrate mental health support into their overall musculoskeletal care approach?
- ☐ Can the provider show you that they've helped other companies improve employee health, reduce absenteeism, and even save money?
- ☐ Do their current members have positive experiences with the provider? Look for high satisfaction rates and opportunities for feedback.



## About Kaiser Permanente

Kaiser Permanente has been providing high-quality health care and coverage for more than 75 years. By connecting care with coverage, we pioneered a new model for health care, where things are designed to work together — and help our members thrive. Our care model enables our teams to think and work as one, coordinating your care seamlessly, so you don't have to — and delivering better care when it matters most.

When employees receive care from doctors at Kaiser Permanente, every visit is captured through their electronic health record, so their doctor can use their health history to inform their care. If they need to see a specialist, important information about their health is easily accessible.

Having a good health plan is important. So is getting high-quality care. Kaiser Permanente was built to give you both.

**To learn more about our health plans call 855-925-2994.**

# Endnotes

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