



Helping a software engineer with back pain to return to work

Andy, a 30 year old male working in an office as a Software Engineer for an SME returned to work following a two month absence due to mechanical back pain. His symptoms had not changed, but he was determined to go back to work. He returned on reduced hours, fewer duties and working from home some of the time. He continued to have limited tolerance for sitting. He described how back pain was aggravated by his work duties and was affecting his participation in activities outside of work.

Andy was referred for a workplace visit from an occupational therapist by a working health services case manager. The case manager liaised with Andy's employer to explain the visit, obtain consent and arrange the appointment.

The occupational therapist visited Andy in his workplace. He was interviewed to determine his current independence in his activities of daily living. He then described his typical work duties to identify the equipment used, the postures adopted and the frequency and the duration of the work activities performed. The objective was to identify those factors that risk aggravating his existing pain.

His desk and chair were too low for his needs. His knees rested at a higher level than his hips and he sat at his chair for long periods. This would encourage posterior pelvic tilt and his low back to slump into a rounded posture. Following the evaluation, a report was produced for Andy and his employer. This contained advice to Andy on the work habits he should practise to promote a good posture at work and to minimise fatigue and strain to the affected soft tissues, i.e. taking microbreaks, standing during meetings, organising his work duties to vary his posture, ensuring good midline sitting to avoid maintaining mildly rotated sitting postures. The report also gave advice to his employer on workstation modifications that would encourage good working postures, i.e. a better specification chair, monitor riser, table rising blocks.

Andy was provided with the recommended modifications and reported that he was attentive to using good working habits. He reported that two months after his workplace visit, he no longer suffered back pain and was performing his full duties at work.

For more information about occupational therapy and work, please visit:

www.COT.org.uk/specialistsections/Work



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