

MSI Spells Double Trouble for Commercial Fishermen



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One on-the-job injury threat for many BC workers is arguably double trouble for commercial fishermen — the musculoskeletal injury (MSI), or strains and sprains that affect muscles, joints, ligaments and other soft tissue. Most will think first of lower back injuries, but don't forget the neck, shoulders, elbows and wrists. Any muscles or joints subject to stress are at risk of MSI.

It's a big problem, as you can see by looking at what injuries keep British Columbians off the job. Back strains cause one-fifth of the total time lost from work, while other strains cost roughly another one-third. Altogether, that's more than half of the total causes of time lost for all industries, and in commercial fishing, MSIs are among the most common injuries.



The tough work of fishing shouldn't include musculoskeletal injuries.

In the last five years, the average MSI compensation claim in your industry lasted 140 days. When related to available fishing time, that is one heck of a lot of time to lose. It needn't be that way. To a large extent, MSI risks in fishing operations really are manageable, and here are some good prevention approaches:

- Use mechanical lifting or pulling equipment instead of physical force where prudent and possible.
- Rotate or vary tasks to reduce repetitive motion.
- Avoid postures that put you at the extremes of any range of motion.
- Hold loads close to your body's centre of gravity.
- Wear appropriate clothing, gloves and footwear to address conditions like cold temperature, water on deck, a rolling boat and so on.
- Keep physically fit to help your muscles and joints minimize MSIs.

It may be impractical to eliminate every MSI risk factor, but you should minimize awkward posture, force, repetition and duration as much as possible. Awkward postures, particularly at the extremes of your range of motion, place a lot of stress on tendons, muscles and other tissues. Think about how you work, and watch how often you lift your shoulder or move it away from the midline of your body, bend or stretch your wrist and forearms, or squat and stoop.

Simple, right? Not if you're a fisherman. The reason is the "double trouble" warning that started this column. What makes commercial fishing different is that workers in other industries can usually rely on stable work platforms. But you often work in harsh conditions on boats that pitch and roll, sometimes very unpredictably. This can complicate prevention of MSIs, but it also makes doing exactly that all the more critical. If you haven't worked on minimizing MSI risks aboard your vessel, begin now and be ready for the upcoming season.

Preventing MSI is important, not only for the health and safety of individuals and crews on fishing vessels, but in the amount it cost your industry in compensation claims during the last five years - \$1.6 million – which doubtless had an impact on what BC's commercial fishing fleet earned. My experience tells me that your industry has more than enough ingenuity to address the issue and find solutions, and I'm confident that you will.

You can direct your comments via email to:
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