STRETCHING
Toward a Safer Workplace

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A LOT OF EMPHASIS is put on reducing workplace injuries in the steel industry—and rightfully so.

However, the most prevalent injuries aren’t the dramatic ones like falls or ill-fated run-ins with materials or equipment—but rather are related to the relatively more low-profile areas of soft tissue injuries or musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs).

MSDs are disorders that affect the muscles, tendons, ligaments, joints, cartilage, nerves, blood vessels and spinal discs. Factors that increase the likelihood of MSDs are force, repetition, vibration, contact stress, posture, static positions and the environment. All of these risk factors are common in the steel industry.

But in most cases, these types of injuries are preventable. A small change in habit can make a large change in regards to MSD injuries. Stretching, short rest breaks, work rotation—even a few deep breaths and good foot placement—can all impact soft tissue injuries.

Stretching for just a few minutes before work is one of the best ways to reduce the risk of these soft tissue injuries. Just as athletes need to stretch and warm up prior to participating in their sport, the same is true for a steel worker as well. Cold joints, tendons and muscles are more likely to get strained, and stretching gets our team members warmed up and ready to work safely.

Other benefits of pre-work stretching are:
➤ Raising the heart rate (the body is prepared for physical exertion)
➤ Speeding up nerve impulses (reflexes are enhanced)
➤ Reducing muscle tension while reducing the risk of injury—particularly to connective tissues, like tendons
➤ Increasing flexibility and joint mobility and sending oxygenated blood to the muscle groups

At Cianbro Fabrication and Coating Corporation, we stretch twice a day: once at the beginning of the shift and again after the lunch break. These stretches take just a few minutes each time, but it also allows us to get the crews together in one place (which we also use for quick safety talks). Another benefit is the opportunity to assess workers fitness for duty at the beginning of each shift; identifying soft tissue injuries early is another way to lessen the impact of these injuries for the worker.

To assist you in your own stretching endeavors, OSHA has established a set of ergonomic guidelines. These voluntary guidelines can help employers identify ergonomic hazards in their workplaces and implement feasible measures to control those hazards. They are not specific to the steel industry; much of the information in these guidelines applies across many industries.
Stretching is helpful for workers of all ages but is especially beneficial for aging workers. Having a structured stretching program educates workers on how to stretch different areas of their bodies. Many workers can and will use these learned techniques to stretch at other times of the day, as needed, and with any luck will also take these stretching practices home with them, subsequently helping to prevent non-work-related injuries as well.
Here are a few things to remember for a successful stretching program:

- **Assign a leader who believes in the benefits of the process.**
- **Do stretches correctly.**
- **Complete the same stretches every time.**
- **Focus on the muscle group being used.**
- **Do not bounce during stretching.**
- **Hold stretches for a minimum of 10 seconds.**

According to a Congressional testimony (in 2000) from Charles N. Jeffress, assistant secretary for occupational safety and health with the U.S. Department of Labor, to the Subcommittee on Employment, Safety and Training of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee: “Work-related musculoskeletal disorders are the most widespread occupational health hazard facing our nation today. Nearly two million workers suffer work-related musculoskeletal disorders every year, and about 600,000 lose time from work as a result. Although the median number of lost workdays associated with these incidents is seven days, the most severe injuries can put people out of work for months and even permanently disable them. In addition, $1 of every $3 spent on workers’ compensation stems from insufficient ergonomic protection. The direct costs attributable to MSDs are $15 to $20 billion per year, with total annual costs reaching $45 to $54 billion.”

If stretching can prevent even a small percentage of these injuries, they may just be the most productive safety practice you can implement in terms of reduced pain and injury—and lost productivity.