

Safety and health: Repetitive stress injuries

When a letter carrier has a serious accident at work, generally everybody knows about it. A trip, a fall, going over backwards on an icy walk, an immediate and obvious back injury from picking up something heavy—these events send up red flags. Right away, the carrier feels intense pain, and there's no doubt that an injury has occurred.

Sometimes, however, there may be no specific accident or traumatic incident, but carriers gradually begin to feel pain in their arms, hands, back, legs or other parts of their bodies. Fingers go numb, arms and hands feel as if they are on fire—and yet there was no single moment when the carrier can remember a specific accident, a trip, fall or obvious muscle strain. These types of injuries, which can be more subtle in onset, can be no less devastating than sudden and traumatic accidents that result in broken bones. Known as **repetitive stress injuries** or **cumulative**

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Repetitive Stress

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trauma disorders, this class of injury accounts for more than 60 percent of all occupational illnesses, according to figures compiled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

NALC stewards and local officers undoubtedly see and help many letter carriers who have suffered such injuries. However, because the pain and trauma associated with such conditions cannot be traced to a single definitive incident, Postal Service managers may be more resistant to acknowledging claims of such injuries. Letter carriers themselves may also be hesitant to admit that

“Symptoms can range from mild aching to sharp, crippling pain.”

they are suffering from repetitive stress, perhaps thinking that the pain and numbness they experience is “just part of the job,” or perhaps an inevitable result of growing older.

For these reasons, NALC local representatives need to learn all they can about such injuries—how they happen, how they can be prevented, and what to do when carriers believe they have a repetitive stress injury. The information in this article should provide a broad base of necessary information, including the **causes of repetitive stress injuries, factors at**

work that increase the risk of such injuries, types of injuries, how to avoid such injuries, and advice on filing OWCP claims for repetitive stress injuries. As will be seen, however, details about how to address the job conditions resulting in these injuries, as well as nuts-and-bolts instructions on handling repetitive injury claims, may require help from additional experts, including the branch compensation specialist and the National Business Agent’s office. (Branch leaders should note that the NALC has no obligation to assist non-members with OWCP problems.)

RSI: What is it?

A short definition of repetitive stress injury contains two key elements. First, it is actual **damage** to body tissues, including muscles, tendons, spinal discs, blood vessels and nerves. Second, the injury is the result of **repeated physical stresses**. These factors distinguish RSI from other kinds of body aches and pains. People who feel the beginning of RSI may believe they have stretched a muscle that is causing minor discomfort. Not true: RSI actually damages tissues and can take a substantial amount of time to heal. The other element, of repeated stress over a period of time, is also key. It is not unusual that the repeated movement itself may not be painful at first—but constant repetitions, especially without taking any breaks, begin to result in pain.

Because of the unique demands of the letter carrier’s job, RSI can affect almost any part of a carrier’s body. Wrists, hands and forearms are vulnerable because of the repetitive motions of casing mail. However, the back, legs and shoulders can also be affected as the carrier constantly lifts heavy objects or walks with a heavy satchel.

The symptoms can range from mild aching to sharp, crippling pain. Symptoms often begin during periods of activity, then disappear during periods of rest. As the symptoms get worse, they begin to interfere with usual work activities. Severe pain, limited mobility, loss of sensation, or muscle weakness make it impossible to perform key job tasks. The condition can affect off-the-job activities as well; the pain can also cause sleep disturbances and mood changes.

It can be difficult to diagnose exactly what kind of RSI may be occurring. Because repeated stress can cause multiple kinds of damage, the problem may appear to be in either the muscles, tendons, ligaments or nerves. As all these body parts are connected, more than one system may be affected. The RSI may even involve damage to all these parts. The most commonly recognized RSI is carpal tunnel syndrome, which is caused by too much pressure on the “median” nerve that runs through the wrist. Symptoms include numbness,

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tingling, an aching sensation, and pain in the hand, often felt during sleep.

However, damage to other parts of the hand, wrist or arm can result in the same set of symptoms. For example, tendinitis, or inflamed tendons, and tenosynovitis, the swelling of the sheath that covers the tendons can also cause pain, swelling and weakness in the hand, elbow or shoulder.

Additional conditions that can be caused by repetitive stress include "tennis elbow," or epicondylitis, which occurs when tendons in the elbow become inflamed. Pain, swelling and weakness in the elbow are symptoms. If shoulder tendons are damaged, rotator cuff tendinitis may result, with pain and limited movement of the shoulder. Bursitis is also considered a repetitive stress injury, and occurs when the "bursa" membrane around the bones in a joint (like the elbow or shoulder) becomes irritated or inflamed. Finally, a wide range of conditions can affect the back, including strained muscles, torn ligaments and herniated or ruptured discs.

What causes RSI

The first and most important step in resolving RSI conditions is to recognize the specific working conditions that put letter carriers at high risk for these injuries. The Department of Labor has identified eight factors that put workers at risk for having such injuries. These factors are:

- **High repetition**—performing the same motion over and over.
- **Excessive force**—needing to use excessive physical effort to get the job done, whether it's pulling, pounding or pushing. The more effort, the harder your body works.
- **Awkward posture**—having to bend or twist any part of your body as you perform work.
- **Static loading**—staying in the same position for too long, which causes muscles to contract.
- **Direct pressure**—when the body comes in continuous contact with a hard surface or edge.
- **Vibration**—experienced when workers must stand on or hold vibrating objects, tools or equipment.
- **Extremes of heat and cold**—when people get cold, their feelings are numbed, blood flow slows, and strength and balance are affected. Working in extreme heat can accelerate fatigue, leading to injury.
- **Poor work organization**—when people have to work to a set pace, cannot take adequate breaks, and face multiple, stressful deadlines.

Reading over this list, NALC stewards and local officers undoubtedly recognize factors that letter carriers

BY THE NUMBERS USPS

USPS Operations—AP11-2000

| | Number | Chg from SPLY* |
|--|------------|----------------|
| Total mail volume year-to-date (YTD) (Billions of pieces) | 175.2 | 2.7% |
| Mail volume by class (YTD in billions) | | |
| First-Class | 87.7 | 1.2% |
| Priority Mail | 1.1 | 3.0% |
| Express | 0.1 | 2.8% |
| Periodicals | 8.7 | -1.4% |
| Standard A (bulk mail) | 75.6 | 5.0% |
| Standard B (parcels/printed material) | 0.9 | 5.5% |
| International | 0.9 | -3.6% |
| Daily DPS letter mail volume on city routes (pieces) | 188.0 mil. | 16.9% |
| Percent of total letter mail | 72.2% | |
| Daily delivery points | 132.0 mil. | 0.7% |
| Percent city | 74.5% | |
| Percent rural | 25.5% | |
| City carrier routes | 167,829 | -0.3% |
| Rural carrier routes | 66,933 | 3.8% |
| Net Income (\$millions) | \$436.0 | -46.9% |
| Total Revenue | \$54,727.2 | 3.0% |
| Total Expense | \$54,291.2 | 3.8% |

Employment/Wages—AP11-2000

| | | |
|---|--------------|--------|
| City carrier employment | 241,163 | -1.0% |
| Percent union members | 91.9% | |
| Percent career employees | 99.8% | |
| City carrier casual/TE employment | | |
| Casuals | 6,266 | 18.6% |
| Percent of bargaining unit | 2.6% | |
| Transitionals | 561 | -39.0% |
| Percent of bargaining unit | 0.2% | |
| City carrier per delivery supervisor | 17.3 | -8.9% |
| Career USPS employment | 788,166 | -1.5% |
| City carrier avg. straight-time wage | \$18.33/hour | 6.3% |
| City carrier overtime ratio (OT hrs/total work hours) | 13.5% | |
| Ratio SPLY | 12.5% | |

*SPLY = Same Period Last Year

This information compiled by the NALC Research Department from USPS Reports.

face in their day-to-day jobs. The key to keeping such conditions from leading automatically to RSI is to **make all carriers aware** of the dangers inherent in such job elements.

"First and foremost, it's an educational process," says Ann Moore, executive vice president of San Diego, CA Branch 70. Moore and other NALC branch leaders have prepared training programs on RSI that they presented at regional training seminars. Moore also tracks these kinds of injuries as part of her branch duties. RSIs, which are filed as CA-2 injuries for compensation, have been mounting steadily, she says. "In the whole year of 1998, I only saw four cases of RSI," she says. "Then in 1999, by the first part of May, there were almost 100 cases reported in our region."

Moore believes that a number of elements of letter carriers' jobs make them particularly susceptible to RSI. "In casing, there's that pinch grip you have to make on each piece of mail as you push it into a small space," she

says. "If you try to keep up a nonstop pace, your fingers and wrists can really be affected." Delivering mail involves a whole range of high-risk motions, she notes, from bending and lifting to turning and twisting. "Plus if you're carrying a satchel, you've got a 35-pound-plus weight on your shoulder all day, and that puts your knees and ankles under stress."

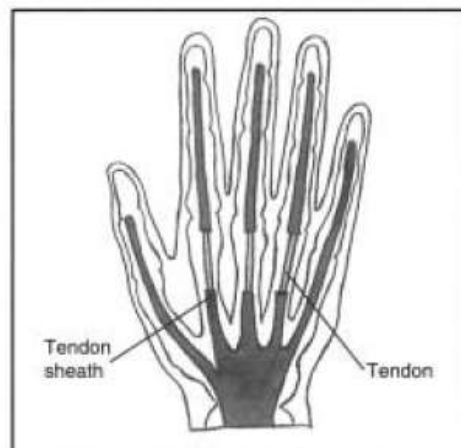
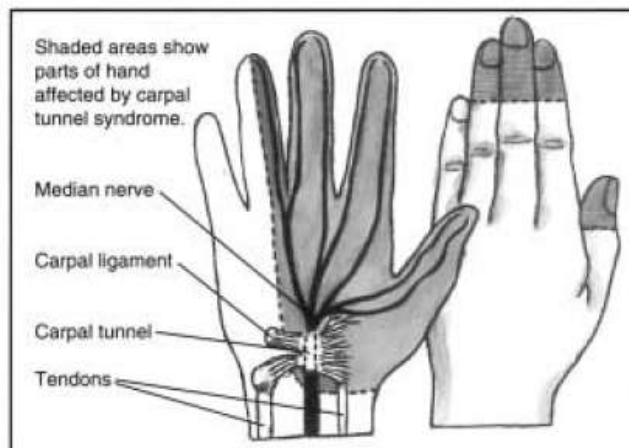
Although Moore constantly advises carriers about the risks of RSI, she says that many people shrug off her warnings. "Especially if someone is really athletic, they'll think they can just work through it, you know, that the pain is normal and it'll go away." The problem, however, is that with RSI the pain will not go away until the damaged tissues are given a chance to rest and repair themselves. People who are reluctant to report an RSI can eventually find themselves in pain constantly—even when they are not working. If left untreated, RSIs can cause permanent damage and disability. "I ask some of these people, what if you were never able

to lift a baby again, or play with your children," Moore says. "That gets them thinking that maybe they should do something."

Help in filing claims

Early treatment for RSI is critical. There's a widely held myth that by the time you develop pain in any of these areas, particularly the back, it's too late to take any preventative steps. This is wrong—people developing any kind of pain should always pay attention to this "early warning system" and try to find some way to reduce stress on their bodies. Changing position as frequently as possible while performing a repetitive task is one recommended strategy. Even stopping work for just a few seconds to stretch and flex muscles can help ward off stress.

If pain persists for a week, it's likely that a repetitive stress injury could be the cause. Worker-developed programs to combat RSI recommend that people should report



Frequent bending of the wrist causes tendons to put pressure on the nerve that passes through the carpal tunnel. Symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome include pain, numbness, and tingling in the thumb and first three fingers.

pain on the job at that point—and certainly not wait until pain is severe or actually disabling. If RSI can be detected early, medical evaluation and treatment might be able to ward off permanent injury.

When reporting suspected repetitive stress injuries that may be work-related, carriers should file OWCP's Form CA-2, "Federal Employees' Notice of Occupational Disease and Claim for Compensation." In addition to the Form CA-2, carriers should prepare a detailed, signed statement describing the factual conditions of employment believed to be the cause of the RSI. This statement is submitted with the Form CA-2 and is used by OWCP to evaluate the claim. Carriers should also keep a copy of the statement as it will help them explain their injuries to their physicians.

The statement should describe the job tasks and the postures and positions used in performing each task and show the amount of time spent in performing each task. It is important that carriers make this statement as detailed as possible. As part of the claim process, carriers must obtain a medical report from a physician that will support the carrier's statement. Whenever possible, injured carriers should see a physician who is knowledgeable about repetitive stress injuries. In some areas, there are physicians who specialize in occupational injuries. It may also be necessary to obtain a referral to a board-certified neurologist, as RSIs often involve some degree of nerve damage.

When visiting their doctors, injured carriers should be prepared to explain their job in detail. The doctor should read the carrier's statement as outlined above and ideally include a copy of that statement with his or her report. It is recommended that physicians include in their

report a reference to the carrier's statement and acknowledgement that the physician has read and understood the carrier's statement. As with other medical reports in support of an OWCP claim, the physician's statement should include a definitive opinion about how the carrier's conditions of employment caused the

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RSI. The opinion should be supported by medical reasons that are as specific as possible.

Continued support

Unfortunately, filing the CA-2 is very rarely the end of the matter for either the carrier or the NALC representative. In these cases, in which members are experiencing continual pain and uncertainty about the debilitating effects of their occupational injury, the NALC representative plays a critical role in following up on all steps of the process. These representatives should plan to work closely with injured carriers to ensure that all

paperwork is completed, that the necessary tests and laboratory results are sent in, and that any obstacles raised are met and overcome. In addition, the NALC representative should work with management to ensure that injured carriers receive appropriate consideration based on the degree of their disability. Many times carriers with RSI are able to perform some work, as long as it is not of the repetitive nature that caused their injuries in the first place. Ascertaining and obtaining appropriate light duty assignments should be carefully monitored by NALC representatives.

The good news about RSI is that if it is caught early enough, effective treatment is possible and need not be invasive, as is surgery. Carriers can expect to fully recover and the effects need not be disabling or permanent. However, it is critical that NALC representatives take all necessary steps to explain the nature of RSIs to the carriers they represent. The need to pay attention to developing symptoms is key, and reports of such injuries should be filed early—as noted above, if the symptoms persist for a week.

NALC representatives should also be prepared to offer emotional support and understanding. Many times people who suffer from RSI do not look injured—there is no obvious cast or bandage to explain the carrier's disability. Yet the pain is very real. Educating all carriers about the causes and effects of RSI can help those who are affected. Also, it might easily happen that other carriers will begin to realize that their symptoms, also, may be the result of RSI.

The workplace can and should be a comfortable environment for all letter carriers. With care and appropriate action, NALC representatives can ensure that people at risk of injury will receive the help they need to avoid permanent disability. ■