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## Common Musculoskeletal Injuries and Conditions in UK Veterans

**Musculoskeletal (MSK)** conditions are a **major cause of chronic pain, functional limitation, and disability** among UK Armed Forces veterans. From intense physical training to operational deployments in challenging environments, service life places unique and sustained stress on the musculoskeletal system. Many of these injuries **persist into civilian life**, often requiring long-term management through the NHS and support from veteran-specific services.

### 1. Low Back Pain and Lumbar Spine Disorders

**Low back pain** remains one of the most commonly reported MSK conditions among service leavers and veterans in the UK. Causes include **load-bearing** (e.g., carrying bergens/body armour), **poor lifting technique, and injuries sustained in vehicle incidents or training**. Chronic cases can result in disc degeneration, nerve root compression (radiculopathy), or lumbar spinal stenosis—often impacting daily activities and employability.

### 2. Knee Injuries

Frequent among military personnel due to activities such as **running, tabbing, jumping, and prolonged kneeling**, knee injuries range from ligament sprains (e.g., ACL/MCL) to patellofemoral pain syndrome. Many cases lead to **degenerative changes** such as osteoarthritis, contributing significantly to medical discharge and long-term disability.



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### 3. Shoulder Injuries

**Rotator cuff tears, bursitis, and impingement syndromes** are often linked to repetitive overhead work in roles such as engineers, infantry, and artillery crews. Chronic shoulder pain can **significantly impair lifting and upper limb function**—common complaints among veterans accessing NHS MSK clinics and veteran support organisations.

### 4. Ankle and Foot Injuries

**Foot and ankle issues**, including sprains, Achilles tendinopathy, plantar fasciitis, and stress fractures, are prevalent in early training phases (e.g., Phase 1/2 training) and airborne-trained personnel. Recurrent injuries may result in **chronic pain or joint instability**, impacting physical activity long-term.

### 5. Hip Disorders

**Conditions like femoroacetabular impingement (FAI)**, labral tears, and trochanteric bursitis are increasingly recognised among veterans with extensive experience in load carriage, prolonged squatting, or jumping (e.g., from vehicles or aircraft). Left untreated, these can lead to **early-onset osteoarthritis** and reduced mobility in later life.

### 6. Neck and Cervical Spine Injuries

**Cervical spine injuries** may arise from helmet use, repetitive jarring (e.g., in armoured vehicles), or blast exposure. Common symptoms include **neck pain, stiffness, headaches, and upper limb tingling or weakness**. These injuries may overlap with post-concussive symptoms in veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan.

## 7. Osteoarthritis (OA)

OA affects many veterans due to years of **physical stress, microtrauma, and joint overuse**. Commonly affected areas include the knees, hips, lower back, and hands. It remains one of the leading causes of **chronic pain** and reduced quality of life in the ageing veteran population.

## 8. Fractures (Acute and Stress)

**Stress fractures** are prevalent in basic training and elite units (e.g., Royal Marines, Parachute Regiment) due to high training intensity. Combat-related fractures—often sustained during deployments in Afghanistan or Iraq—can lead to **long-term joint dysfunction** or **post-traumatic arthritis**.

## 9. Amputations

Blast injuries from IEDs during Operation Herrick and Operation Telic have led to a significant cohort of **post-9/11 veterans with limb loss**. Secondary MSK problems—such as overuse injuries in the intact limbs, back pain, and phantom limb pain—require **ongoing, multidisciplinary care** through NHS specialist services and prosthetics centres.

## 10. Chronic Pain / Fibromyalgia

Conditions such as **fibromyalgia** are increasingly recognised in UK veterans, particularly among those with **comorbid PTSD, depression, or sleep disorders**. These often present as diffuse pain and fatigue, and may be misunderstood or misattributed in general healthcare settings.

## UK Veterans' Health & Disability Context

In the UK, MSK conditions are a key contributor to:

- **Medical discharge** from the Armed Forces
- **War Pensions and Armed Forces Compensation Scheme (AFCS)** claims
- **NHS referrals** for orthopaedics, physiotherapy, and pain management

## Common service-related MSK conditions compensated under the AFCS include:

- Back injuries and spinal degeneration
- Knee osteoarthritis and ligament damage
- Shoulder instability and impingement
- Flat feet (pes planus)
- Fractures with residual functional impairment
- Amputation complications

## Contact Us

For more information and support, get in touch with our advisors and veterans with lived experience today.

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