



BACK IN WORK

Managing back pain in the workplace

A leaflet for employers and workers in small businesses

Introduction

In any small business, workers are the most valuable asset and it is well worth looking after them properly. Back disorders are the commonest form of ill health at work. Tackling back pain effectively requires good management and a partnership approach, in which employers, workers and others have roles to play.

This leaflet is for employers, managers and workers in small businesses, safety representatives and those responsible for health and safety. It tells you how to develop the right arrangements to manage back pain. It also gives a summary of legal responsibilities on manual handling and describes sources of further information, such as guidelines from the Faculty of Occupational Medicine.

Remember, back pain can be managed successfully.



Who gets back pain?

Most of us have back pain at some time. Usually the pain is not due to anything serious and it settles within a matter of days or weeks. Many people manage the problem themselves without seeing their doctor. But a doctor should be seen by those worried about their back pain or those for whom the pain persists or suddenly gets worse. When the back is painful, activity may be limited for a time but that does not necessarily mean that continuing to work will do any harm.

What causes back pain?

Most back pain does not have an identifiable cause. Worrying about back pain will only make it worse and hold back recovery.

What can we do about back pain?

In the past, the accepted response to back pain was bed rest. Evidence now shows that rest does not help recovery. Trying to reduce the pain by avoiding movement slows recovery and can lead to long-term back pain. It is much better to keep as normally active as possible. Manipulative treatment can help in some cases. In particular, having a painful back need not necessarily stop anyone going to work. In fact, the longer someone is off work because of back pain the less likely they are to ever go back.

Advice for workers with back pain

What can I do to help myself?

Here is a list of simple do's and don'ts that will help you deal with back pain and let you get on with your life.

Do's

- Do stay as active as usual, if possible. But see your doctor if you are worried about the back pain or if the pain persists or suddenly gets worse.
- Do speak to your employer and, if necessary, discuss what can be done to help you stay at work.
- Do find out about back pain. A summary of good advice can be found in guidance booklets like *The Back Book* (see Further information).

Don't's

- Don't take to bed and wait for the pain to go away. The sooner you get back to normal activity the better.
- Don't worry. Back pain is rarely serious and worry delays recovery.
- Don't avoid activity simply as a way of avoiding the pain.

Advice for employers

What can I do to help a worker with back pain?

As an employer, you can do a lot to help one of your staff who reports back pain. It is most important to be positive and helpful in aiming to remove obstacles to recovery:

- Make sure they have the right information and advice on how to cope with back pain and lead a normal life. The easiest way to do this is to give them a copy of an information booklet; *The Back Book* is recommended (see Further information).
- Reassure them that you are concerned about them and want to help. Ask about what they find difficult about the job. This may give you an opportunity to make jobs physically less demanding as a temporary measure to help them stay at work.
- If they have seen their doctor, tell them you are willing to discuss the situation with the doctor and to work with the doctor to support any treatment that is recommended.
- If they go off sick, show your interest by keeping in touch. Discuss whether modified work or a gradual build-up to normal duties will help a return to work.

Advice

Managing back pain

How do I know if we have a problem?

To find out whether your business has a problem with back pain, walk around the workplace and speak to the workers, especially those who seem to be using cushions on seats or workstation modifications as back protection. Ask the safety representatives whether there are any problems. Check the accident book and sickness absence records.

What can I do about it?

The main cost of back pain to the worker and the business is sickness absence. Since most back pain is not caused by work, efforts aimed at preventing injury at work may not be enough. You need to run your business in a way that lets you know when problems are developing, for example by enabling your staff to report back pain problems early. They will not do this if it threatens their job, their wages or their bonus payments. An early warning gives you the chance to deal with the problem promptly.

Activity is the key to recovery. Anything you can do to encourage someone with back pain to remain active will help them get back to full fitness and normal duties sooner. You can do this by helping them stay at work or return to work quickly, perhaps by arranging for light duties or modified work. It is important that the worker realises that modified work is meant to help them back to work. It does not imply that there is anything wrong with the task to be modified. You can review your risk assessment if there is any doubt about this. But modified work should only be offered if it is needed and even then should be for a limited period.

In addition to activity, early assessment and treatment can also be helpful. Your efforts to encourage activity will be even more effective if the activity is co-ordinated with appropriate treatment.

The ideal approach is for employer, worker and health professional to get together to discuss the situation. This shows your staff that you are concerned. It will also help them understand why an early return to work may be best for them. At the same time, the health professional can reassure their patient that there is nothing seriously wrong.

If the worker is having difficulty returning to normal duties by about six weeks, you should speak to the health professional about setting up an active rehabilitation programme.

Can I arrange for treatment and rehabilitation?

Arranging treatment and rehabilitation is easier for large businesses that may have their own specialists and an occupational health service. But small businesses can also have access to these kinds of arrangements:

- some make arrangements through their employer's liability insurance. Most insurers now offer this sort of service;
- some have 'good neighbours'. Some large companies offer small businesses in their supply chain access to their support services;
- some go it alone. Some small businesses find it worthwhile to make local partnership arrangements with health professionals. These contacts can also help advise on how to avoid risk in the workplace.

A small plastics company with 25 workers made informal arrangements with a local physiotherapist to refer workers reporting back pain for assessment and treatment. The managing director says, 'Early treatment minimises the problems for staff and helps to keep them at work, a big plus in a small firm like ours and well worth the cost.'

However, not all therapies are equally effective. It is important to ask if the health professional follows evidence-based good practice. Make sure they know you have a system for providing modified work and will support your early return-to-work arrangements.

How do I find out what is available locally?

A lot of people can advise you. Local doctors, for example, should be able to tell you how long it normally takes for referral to therapy. If access to these services is difficult in your area, your trade association, chamber of commerce or trade union representative, if you have one, will probably know if there are any ‘good neighbour’ large businesses you could contact. Your local HSE office or local authority environmental health department might also be able to advise.

Local physiotherapists, osteopaths, chiropractors or other therapists will know about partnership arrangements. Local support groups for those with back pain, such as BackCare, are also likely to know what is available. If you do not have a local contact number, BackCare’s head office (Tel: 020 8977 5474) should be able to advise you.

Managing workplace risk

What about risks in the workplace?

Do not add to your problem. Remember you have a duty under health and safety legislation to make sure the risks to health in the workplace are properly controlled. Manual handling (including lifting, bending, twisting) and whole body vibration (which occurs, for example, when you drive heavy vehicles) are known risk factors for back pain. Accidents, such as trips and falls, can also be a factor.

The Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992 require you to eliminate handling risks and, if that is not practicable, to assess and reduce the risks. This means that you should first try to reorganise processes or, at least, reduce the number of times a hazardous load is handled. If this cannot be done, you should assess the risks and take action to reduce them.

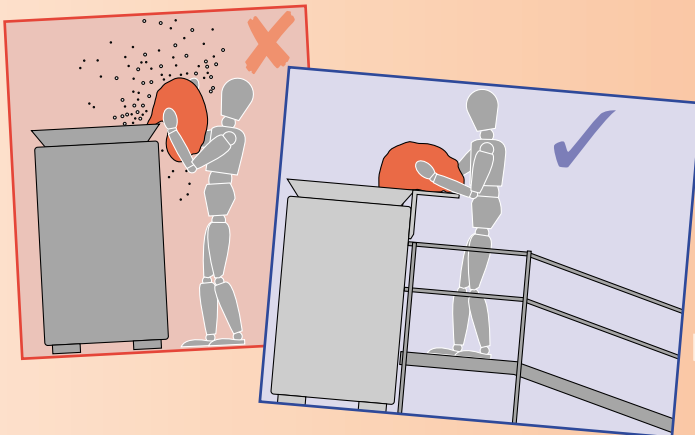
There are a number of good checklists available that can help you identify and deal with handling risks. Examples are included in HSE’s guidance on the manual handling regulations (see Further information). Many of the

solutions to manual handling problems will be to make jobs physically easier by, for example, moving loads on wheels, using hoists as an aid to lifting or providing better handgrips or handles on loads.

Talk to your staff; they know what they find difficult and often have good ideas about how to improve things. Involving workers and safety representatives in discussions about how to improve health and safety will also make it easier to agree changes and workers will be more likely to follow procedures that they have helped to design. If there are safety representatives appointed by trade unions that you recognise, the law requires you to consult them.

Some general tips to help avoid problems include:

- making sure loads are not handled above shoulder height or in cramped working areas;
- arranging cover for holidays and unexpected absences so that individuals are not left to cope alone with handling normally done by two or more workers; and
- keeping the workplace clear of obstructions that can cause trip and slip accidents when handling loads.



Making a difference

How do I make all this happen?

To beat the back pain problem, you need to do more than make up a set of rules. You need to follow them - the following checklist may help you do this.

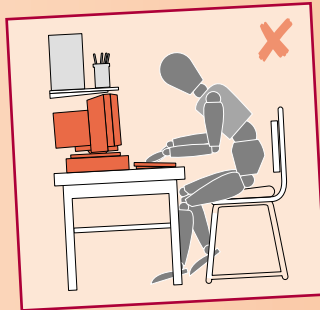
- Are your staff and their safety representatives telling you when back pain problems start to develop?
- Do you review your risk assessments when necessary?
- Do you check the accident book and sickness absence records regularly?
- Are you responding promptly when someone reports back pain?
- Do you have information and advice, such as *The Back Book*, readily available? (See Further information.)
- Do you arrange modified work when necessary to help people stay at work until they are fit for their normal job?

If the answer to any of these questions is 'No', then you need to take action. Otherwise, there will be no chance to deal quickly with obstacles to recovery. You will always be trying to cope with problems that have become needlessly difficult.

Summary

A partnership approach, bringing together employer, worker and health professional, will help you to:

- provide the right information and advice;
- keep those with back pain at work and encourage early return to work (through modified work arrangements for a limited period where necessary);
- provide quick access to medical assessment and treatment (when needed) through effective links with local health professionals; and
- minimise workplace risk exposure by ensuring compliance with health and safety legislation.



Further information

There are many sources of information and advice about back pain and how to manage the risks in the workplace. Some of the main sources are listed below:

HSE Publications

Manual handling. Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992. Guidance on Regulations L23 HSE Books 1998 (Second edition)

ISBN 0 7176 2415 3

Getting to grips with manual handling. A short guide for employers INDG143(rev1) HSE Books 2000 Single copies free, multiple copies in priced packs ISBN 0 7176 1754 8

In the driving seat. Advice to employers on reducing back pain in drivers and machinery operators INDG242 HSE Books 1997 Single copies free, multiple copies in priced packs ISBN 0 7176 1314 3

Manual handling. Solutions you can handle HSG115 HSE Books 1994 ISBN 0 7176 0693 7

Five steps to risk assessment INDG163(rev1) HSE Books 1998 Single copies free, multiple copies in priced packs ISBN 0 7176 1565 0

HSE priced and free publications are available by mail order from HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 2WA. Tel: 01787 881165 Fax: 01787 313995. Website: www.hsebooks.co.uk

HSE priced publications are also available from good booksellers.

For other enquiries ring HSE's InfoLine Tel: 08701 545500, or write to HSE's Information Centre, Broad Lane, Sheffield S3 7HQ. Website: www.hse.gov.uk

Publications from other sources

The Back Book The Stationery Office 2000 ISBN 0 11 322 312 9 The Publications Centre, PO Box 276, London SW8 5DT Tel: 0870 600 5522 Fax: 0870 600 5533 (or try the website www.itsofficial.net - search by title and Roland as author)

Occupational health guidelines for the management of low back pain at work. Evidence Review and Recommendations The Faculty of Occupational Medicine, 6 St Andrew's Place, London NW1 4LB*

Back pain at work: A guide for people at work and their employers Copies free from the Faculty of Occupational Medicine (address as above)

Working Backs Scotland Pack Copies free from local Regional Health Board

Beating back pain in small firms European Week poster and booklet available free from the TUC, Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LS

*The Occupational Health Guidelines for the Management of Low Back Pain were prepared by the Faculty of Occupational Medicine with support from the British Occupational Health Research Foundation and funded by Blue Circle Industries PLC as their 1999 Community Project of the Year. The free guide was a product of that partnership.

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the references listed in this publication, their future availability cannot be guaranteed.

Helplines

NHS Direct - Tel: 0845 4647

HSE for Northern Ireland - Tel: 028 90 542122

Support group

BackCare, 16 Elm Tree Road, Teddington TW11 8ST - Tel: 020 8977 5474

Websites

www.backpain.org (BackCare)

www.ohn.gov.uk/ohn/ohn.htm (Back Pain Initiative in England)

www.workingbacksscotland.com (Back Pain Initiative in Scotland)

www.facocmed.ac.uk (Faculty of Occupational Medicine guidelines)

www.rcgp.org.uk (Royal College of General Practitioners guidelines)

www.hse.gov.uk (Health and Safety Executive)

www.hse-ni.org.uk (HSE for Northern Ireland)



This leaflet contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.

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