

# Back Care in the Workplace



**“Find a place inside where there’s joy, and the joy will burn out the pain.”**

**- Joseph Campbell**

**“Time is not a cure for chronic pain, but it can be crucial for improvement. It takes time to change, to recover, and to make progress.”**

**- Mel Pohl**

**“Be patient and tough; someday this pain will be useful to you.”**

**- Ovid**

Back pain is a major health concern for workers and is likely to affect 80 percent of adults in Britain during their lifetime. Backs are complex structures comprising the interlinking vertebrae bones of the spine, cartilage or discs, muscles, tendons and nerves, and backs play a central role in supporting, moving and protecting our bodies. Any problems with our backs can have a debilitating impact on us physically and mentally.

Triggers of back pain can vary from one-off movements such as standing up from a sofa to ongoing triggers such as regularly lifting heavy items in the workplace. The Health and Safety Executive estimates that there were 223 , 000 cases of work-related back problems in 2014-15 and that some 2.9 million working days were lost due to work-related back pain at an average of 13 working days lost per sufferer.

Fortunately, there are many steps that both employees and employers can take to reduce the risk of back pain and the consequent loss of work days, as well as treating the debilitating impact of this condition.

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## A manager's checklist

Spotting the signs of musculoskeletal (MSK) issues in employees:

- ▶ Does a DSE assessment need to be completed?
- ▶ Has anything been flagged during the DSE?
- ▶ Has there been an increase in absence due to MSK complaints?
- ▶ Has there been a negative change in mood?
- ▶ Has there been a change in posture (slumping, slouching)?
- ▶ Has there been a general increase in complaints?
- ▶ Is there a history of MSK complaints or injuries?
- ▶ Has there been an increase in stress?
- ▶ Have any manual handling tasks changed?
- ▶ Have any of the red flag signs below been reported?

Any 'yes' answers may require further investigation or management.



## Red flags

It is only in rare occasions that back and leg pain is medically serious, even if your pain is severe. There are however a few things you need to be aware of which may indicate a serious reason for back pain. In most cases a cluster of these symptoms need to be present before it should be classified as serious.

- ▶ Pain while resting and pain that is worse at night
- ▶ A traumatic onset of pain, such as after an accident
- ▶ Pain that gets progressively worse and is not affected by any change in posture or position
- ▶ Persistently feeling unwell
- ▶ Significant unexplained weight loss and a loss in appetite
- ▶ When the first episode of back pain occurs under 20 or over 50 years of age
- ▶ Widespread progressive bilateral leg weakness, pins and needles or numbness
- ▶ Early morning stiffness that lasts for more than an hour
- ▶ Back like pain around the trunk area
- ▶ A medical history of cancer, steroid use, drug use, HIV
- ▶ Pins and needles or numbness around the genitals or anus
- ▶ 5 D's - Dizziness, Double vision, Drop attacks – sudden spontaneous fall while standing or walking, Dysphasia – impairment of speech and language, Disturbed gait – deviation from normal walking

If you are worried about any of the above you should seek medical advice straight away.

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## Managing persistent pain

### The Facts

- ▶ 44% of all work related illnesses are musculoskeletal disorders[1]
- ▶ 7.6 million working days are lost every year due to work related musculoskeletal disorders1
- ▶ Musculoskeletal injuries make up 57% of long-term absence for manual workers, and 46% for non-manual workers[2]
- ▶ An estimated 583,000 people in Great Britain suffer from a musculoskeletal disorder they believe was caused or made worse by work[1]
- ▶ Chronic or persistent pain is a growing problem that results in recurrent episodes and more frequent courses of treatment
- ▶ Persistent pain can cause significant disability

[1] Health & Safety Executive statistics

[2] CIPD Absence Management survey 2011 in partnership with Simplyhealth

### Why do you get back pain?

Acute pain in most cases disappears within three months when the underlying cause of pain, usually in response to an unidentifiable event, has been treated or has healed.

Chronic pain occurs because pain from an acute condition remains active, despite the injury healing. Sometimes the condition itself is of a chronic nature, such as arthritis, so pain is due to an ongoing pathological process. Chronic or persistent pain is often permanent. It is still unknown why it occurs.

### A vicious cycle

Persistent pain can be stressful and is frequently associated with alterations in sleep, strain on relationships, social withdrawal, fatigue, decreased concentration, depression, reduced activity and impaired function. All these factors interact with each other, so increase the pain you experience and affect your quality of life. It creates a vicious cycle that needs to be broken.

### Take control

Managing your symptoms through addressing the physical, psychological and social factors will improve your quality of life.

### Exercise

Exercise can help to reduce your pain and manage it in the long term, as well as provide many other psychological, physical and social benefits. You should aim to do three main types of exercise:

- ▶ Stretching
- ▶ Strengthening
- ▶ Aerobic

Do exercise you enjoy, but in a paced manner so your pain does not increase. You don't have to cut out a particular exercise completely if it is causing more pain, rather reduce the amount you do.

### Pace yourself

When starting or returning to an activity you have been avoiding due to your symptoms, it is important to pace yourself and establish your baseline so your body adjusts gradually. Organise activities to time, not pain, as this will give you more control.

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## Set goals

Setting goals will help keep you focused to break the vicious pain cycle. These goals can be around anything, such as exercising, social situations or work.

Make sure your goals are achievable by breaking down the larger goals into manageable components, for example, building up the amount you stand each time you watch your child play football.

## Find your baseline

- ▶ Choose an activity, such as sitting or walking
- ▶ Measure the length of time you are comfortably able to do this without your pain starting or increasing
- ▶ Do this at least three times a day, on good and bad days
- ▶ Take the average of these times and take off 20%

## Additional support

Exercise will help you to manage and reduce your pain, as well as act as a prevention. The benefits of exercise are plentiful; you can move more easily, reduce stiffness and tightness, improve your general fitness, make your bones stronger, improve your immune system, help you get a better nights sleep, improve your ability to function, help you to manage your weight, increase your confidence as you move without exaggerating your pain, boost your positive emotions and reduce depression.

You should aim to do stretching, strengthening and aerobic exercises. To get you started, try the back stretches included in the link below. If you have any pre-existing issues, please discuss these with your GP or Physiotherapist before completing any exercises.

<https://www.lifehack.org/492069/4-simple-desk-based-stretches-for-effective-lower-back-pain-relief>.

