

Key facts on back pain at work for employers

- ◆ Back pain is the second most common cause of absence from work in Great Britain. Every year over four million working days are lost as a result of back pain and on average an employee with back pain takes 17 days off to recover from an episode.
- ◆ Back pain can severely impact someone's ability to do their job, although work may not have necessarily caused the back pain in the first place.
- ◆ Adequate back pain prevention and management is advantageous for both employers and employees. There is good evidence to show that work can be beneficial in helping most people either return to full fitness or manage their back pain. From the employers perspective keeping someone in work helps maintain the skills level and knowledge that the person brings to the team and environment.
- ◆ With the right measures many people with back pain are able to continue or return to work. To do this effectively employers and employees need to have open and honest lines of communication. They must clearly detail expectations from both sides of the often simple measures that can be implemented to enable employees with back pain to remain at, or return to work.

The tips below can be helpful for preventing and managing back pain at work. More information is provided in the leaflets and websites mentioned under 'Further reading'.

Prevention of back pain at work

1. Ongoing risk assessment of all manual handling jobs and the training involved.
2. Regular refresher training for manual handling particularly around any new situations that may arise.
3. Changing the culture to ensure that employees realise that taking regular breaks particularly from desk-based or repetitive work, is acceptable.
4. Promotion of physical activity via a wellbeing programme i.e. negotiation of collective gym membership, football or netball teams or simple posters advocating using the stairs not the lift.
5. Changing the beliefs from the negative: "Back pain means I have hurt my back" or "back pain needs rest" to the positive: "lets work together to help you stay active and manage your back pain".

Management of back pain at work

Even with the best prevention measures possible, chances are that some employees will experience back pain at some stage. It is therefore important to implement back pain management policies to keep them active and at work.

Adequate back pain management requires identification and management of all risk factors that are relevant to the employee in question. Back pain is as individual as the person who has got the back pain. Therefore whilst it is important to have policies in place these must be flexible enough to deal with the individual on a case by case basis.

The following measures have shown to be helpful for many employees with back pain:

- ◆ Temporary changes in duties and activities to avoid activities that exacerbate back pain such as manual handling or heavy lifting.
- ◆ Temporary changes in working hours.
- ◆ Temporarily allowing longer or more frequent breaks to enable employees to stretch or exercise.
- ◆ Promotion of physical activity at work, perhaps a bespoke set of exercises.

- ◆ Ergonomic assessment of the workplace that takes a holistic view of the job required from the time they start in the morning to the time they go home.
- ◆ Regular meetings to consult with the employee and discuss their ability to do their job and any possible changes in their duties. Agree a plan and timescale for review and work towards return to normal activities.
- ◆ In a few circumstances and with the permission of the employee, establish contact with his/her GP or appoint an occupational physician to promote communication between the workplace, the employee and the doctor.

Assisting employees with back pain to return to work

Sometimes a period of sick leave is unavoidable, but it is in the interest of the employee and employer to keep these periods as short as possible.

Maintain regular contact with the employee. Agree timescales for regular review and discuss what changes are needed in the workplace to assist them in returning to work.

In consultations with the employee, consider re-training if the job is not suitable for someone with a more long-term back problem.

Further reading

For employers:

- ◆ Tackling musculoskeletal problems; a guide for clinic and workplace. By: NAS Kendall, AK Burton, CJ Main & PJ Watson. Available from The Stationery Office or download from www.tsoshop.co.uk/flags
- ◆ Work & Health: Changing how we think about common health problems. By: G Waddell & K Burton. Available from The Stationery Office or download from http://www.tsoshop.co.uk/gempdf/Work_and_Health_Leaflet_1.pdf.

For employees:

- ◆ Lifting, Shifting, Moving; preventing and managing back pain at work. Available from BackCare, 0208 977 5474 or www.backcare.org.uk
- ◆ Sitting, Typing, Writing; preventing and managing back pain at work. Available from BackCare, 0208 977 5474 or www.backcare.org.uk
- ◆ Back care at work: an ergonomic guide to manual handling. Available from BackCare, 0208 977 5474 or www.backcare.org.uk
- ◆ Health & Work: employee booklet. By: G Waddell & AK Burton. Available from The Stationery Office or download from http://www.tsoshop.co.uk/gempdf/Health_and_Work_Employees_Booklet.pdf.

Useful websites

- ◆ BackCare, the Charity for Healthier Backs: www.backcare.org.uk
- ◆ Health and Safety Executive: www.hse.gov.uk/msd
- ◆ NHS: www.nhs.uk/conditions/Back-pain.