

## Discussing back pain issues with colleagues and bosses

The fact that work is beneficial to your health and wellbeing may sound strange, especially when you are struggling to do your job because of back pain, but it makes sense if you look at what benefits work can actually provide. Work is part of the "staying active" regime that is so important when experiencing back pain. It helps to promote recovery and rehabilitation, not only for back pain but also for other health conditions that you may experience, and your colleagues can give you support and help in coping with your back pain and any other problem you may face.

Considering the benefits to be gained by remaining at work you could see why communicating with your employer and colleagues about your back pain is so important. Some people feel anxious about what will happen if they admit to having difficulties as a result of their back pain. Fortunately, there are many opportunities to manage back pain in the work environment.

Kate's story illustrates the experience of trying to manage back pain at work:

### Kate

"For the first year after my back pain started I was loathe to admit to it at work and I tried to carry on as normal. Even in a sedentary office environment there are some activities which I have to be very careful about which other people may not think twice about. Eventually, when my back pain had become more difficult to manage I decided that I had to be honest about my difficulties to protect myself, even though I felt a bit of a wimp and didn't like drawing attention to myself or asking for help.

Despite my misgivings I have found colleagues and bosses to be very understanding and helpful, without exception. Usually, it is possible to find somebody else to do the heavy lifting and carrying for example when moving archive boxes full of paperwork, or the bending and crawling involved in relocating my computer and printer.

Day to day I try to pace myself when sitting in front of the computer, even though this is easier said than done sometimes! I also ensure my desk space is set up appropriately which work's safety adviser checked for me. I also do activities like filing in small chunks which I can manage. If I need to get more reams of printer paper I use the opportunity to have one or more walks down to stores so that I only carry a maximum of two reams at a time. Once I've bagged up lots of confidential waste I ask our facilities man to collect it on a trolley and take it away so that I don't have to carry it to storage. By opening up to work about the difficulties I was having with my back I have been able to reduce the lifting and bending which might aggravate my back pain."

Kate's experience shows us that by trying to carry on at work without telling anyone about back pain there is the potential for the pain to become harder to manage. It wasn't until Kate's pain became unmanageable that she felt she had to tell her employer and colleagues about what she was experiencing. This was hard for her, but ultimately it opened up a new stage in her working life where she was able to adapt her tasks and better manage her pain. Communicating about her back pain and learning new ways to manage at work was the difference between staying in work and leaving her job.

## You are not alone

Make sure you communicate if you are experiencing difficulties at work due to back pain. The benefits of being in work are not only important to you as an employee, but also to your employer. After all a healthy and happy employee is of much more value than an unmotivated employee. It is therefore important to realise that you are not on your own when you are trying to cope with back pain at work. There are many people who want to see you at work and managing your health at work should be a team effort. You, your employer and your GP have responsibilities in this effort, but progress is only possible when you are all openly communicating

Your organisation may employ health and safety professionals, occupational health providers or other qualified human resource professionals. These people are there to assist you and your manager in reducing health risks and accommodating any reasonable needs you may have. In the first instance you might speak to your line manager about what you are experiencing, however it is possible to approach others for support such as contacting Human Resources Department directly. If you are a union member and have concerns about talking to your employers about your health it may be possible to seek support from your union representative.

## Ideas to discuss with your employer

The first thing to do when back pain hampers your work is to see if you can change your work to better suit the ability of your body to cope. You can think of very simple measures or more widespread changes, depending on what you think would work best for you and your organisation. It may help to discuss with your employer if any adaptations to your job would help. For example:

- ◆ Changes to how you do things  
Have you been using lifting and handling aids when moving heavy or large items? Do you think you can benefit from training to use such tools? Would it be possible to walk to see a colleague in person rather than emailing or telephoning from your desk? These small breaks from your desk can be effective for people with back pain.
- ◆ Changes to the tasks you do  
If certain activities give you more discomfort than others, you may be able to agree with your line manager a temporary change in your duties. If heavy lifting makes your back pain worse you could discuss the possibility of doing some other tasks until your back pain has settled down.
- ◆ Changes to your work environment  
Is your work environment adequately set up? This is not only important for office workers, but also for people doing manual jobs. Can you make some changes to limit repetitive heavy lifting or bending?
- ◆ Changes to your hours

Many people with back pain find that they can work for a certain period but then the pain increases and they need to stop. Instead of ceasing all your work you could discuss temporary changes in your working hours. If you are working part-time, you may be able to spread your working hours over more days. Full-timers may want to agree a temporary reduction in working hours which is preferable to going on sick leave.

As you can see many of these changes are simple to integrate in your daily routine. Discuss them with your line manager and explain that these simple changes will allow you to continue coming to work. Also discuss when you will evaluate these measures and agree a plan on how to return to your normal activities.