

Health and Safety Bulletin

Backcare Awareness Week: 8-12 October 2012

From 8-12 October 2012 it's Backcare Awareness Week. The aim of the weeklong event, which is organised by BackCare, the charity for healthier backs, is to raise awareness of the problems back pain can cause, as well as prevention and treatments.

For many UNISON members, back pain can be caused by problems with manual handling, which is one of most common causes of injury at work. Manual handling causes over a third of all workplace injuries, including work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) such as upper and lower limb pain/disorders, joint and repetitive strain injuries.

Manual handling injuries can occur almost anywhere in the workplace and heavy manual labour, awkward postures and previous or existing injury can increase the risk.

Work-related manual handling injuries can have serious implications for both the employer and the person who has been injured.

Employers may have to bear substantial costs, through lost production, sickness absence, costs of retraining, wages/overtime to cover for the absent person, and potentially compensation payments.

The injured person may find that their ability to do their job is affected and there may be an impact on their lifestyle, leisure activities, ability to sleep and future job prospects.

Therefore, it is essential that employers manage the risks to their employees as referred to in the Manual Handling Regulations. See UNISON's guide to the six pack (unison.org.uk/acrobat/10349.pdf) for more information.

Very simply, employers must:

- Avoid hazardous manual handling operations so far as is reasonably practicable - this may be done by redesigning the task to avoid moving the load or by automating or mechanising the process.

- Make a suitable and sufficient assessment of any hazardous manual handling operations that cannot be avoided.
- Reduce the risk of injury from those operations to the lowest level reasonably practicable - particular consideration should be given to the provision of mechanical assistance but, where this is not reasonably practicable, then other improvements to the task, the load and the working environment should be explored.
- Review risk assessments if there is reason to suspect it is no longer valid, or if there has been any significant changes in the manual handling operations.
- Provide training and information for employees, and specific information about the load.

We expect MSDs, back pain, and other health and safety issues at work to be far more likely because of the government cutting health and safety funding, reducing the number of workplace inspections, and undermining the ability of councils to enforce health and safety rules. They are also intending to scrap health and safety regulations, which they claim are a burden on business.

UNISON believes that by cutting the funding to develop and enforce health and safety at work, business and the taxpayer will face the bigger burden of an injured and unwell workforce.

If you share our belief that everyone should be able to work without having their health damaged by their job, march with us on the 20th October 2012 in London for 'a future that works'.

What can UNISON safety reps do?

- Encourage anyone who is concerned about the government's attack on health and safety at work to march with us on 20th October 2012 in London for 'a future that works' (unison.org.uk/20102012/index.asp);
- Raise awareness of back pain using the 'Is your job a pain?' (unison.org.uk/file/A3490.pdf) recruitment leaflet;
- Read UNISON's health and safety information sheet on back pain – musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) (unison.org.uk/file/B2365.doc);
- Put the 'Don't repeat the same mistakes – RSI' (unison.org.uk/acrobat/17034.pdf) recruitment poster on notice boards in your workplace;
- Read UNISON's health and safety information sheet on repetitive strain injury (unison.org.uk/file/179.pdf);
- When conducting your workplace health and safety inspection, remember to inspect lifting and handling hazards;
- Negotiate a manual handling policy with your employer; and
- Ask to see the employer's manual handling risk assessment, and ensure that they have introduced the necessary protective and preventative measures. If the employer has not conducted a risk assessment, remind them of their duty to do so.