

## A guide to safe manual handling

More than a third of injuries reported to the Health and Safety Executive are from incidents involving manual handling procedures. These injuries are costly to the employee and the employer. The Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992 (Amended 2002) apply to any process where manual handling occurs. It offers a framework to help reduce the number of accidents and injuries from these procedures.

Common manual handling injuries

Manual handling can lead to what is known as musculoskeletal disorders - this covers any acute or chronic injury, damage or disorder of the joints or other tissues in the limbs, shoulders or the back. Back injuries are particularly common. The spine is a complex structure, with numerous ligaments, muscles, and disks separating each vertebra, and it is easily injured.

Musculoskeletal injuries and disorders usually involve, but are not limited to:

1. Strains (where a muscle is overstretched or torn) both immediate and those that occur over time due to repeated movements
2. Sprains (torn or twisted ligaments)
3. Fractures and intra-vertebral disc injuries

## Manual handling risk assessments

The purpose of the risk assessment is to identify hazardous practices by looking at the task, individual, load and the environment. It is also to decide who may be harmed by the process, to look at the existing controls and to decide if further interventions are necessary. The person carrying out the assessment should be:

1. Familiar with the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, the Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992 (Amended 2002), and any amendments or updates.
2. Familiar with the processes being carried out
3. Competent and sufficiently knowledgeable

The assessment should be written down and the recommendations acted upon where reasonably practicable.

The assessment should consider the following:

### LOAD

- Is it an awkward shape
- Is it heavy
- Can the load shift; is it unstable or unpredictable
- Are there handholds or can the packaging be made to include handholds
- Is team handling required
- Are the contents hazardous

### TASK

- Is it manageable
- Are there alternatives to using human labour (e.g. a forklift truck)
- Can the height of the lift be made more suitable
- Can lifting above the head or below the knees be avoided
- Can twisting or repetitive movement be reduced
- If repetitive movements are involved the weight of the load will need to be reduced
- Does the operator need to hold the load away from their body, or push or pull
- Can mechanical aids be used, e.g. trolleys, hoists, roller tracks etc.

## ENVIRONMENT

- Is there enough space
- Is it cold enough to reduce the sensation of touch
- Is it hot, leading to a likelihood of sweaty palms and reduced grip
- Are there varying floor levels
- Is there sufficient lighting
- Do different surfaces have to be crossed
- Could the environment change rapidly - e.g. if outdoors, rain, snow etc.

## INDIVIDUAL

- Is the worker fit and trained to carry out the task
- Does it require unusual capability
- Does personal protective equipment (PPE) need to be used and would this affect the movement, grip or perception levels of the operator
- Is the load a hazard to particular people e.g. pregnant workers

### **Duties of employers and employees**

Employers must:

1. Properly assess the risks of injury relating to all manual handling operations in the workplace.
2. Put in place a safe system of work.
3. Avoid the need for manual handling as far as reasonably practicable.
4. Reduce any remaining risks as far as reasonably practicable.
5. Provide information and sufficient training.
6. Reassess any manual handling work at regular intervals, or if any factors identified in the risk assessment change.

### **Employees must:**

1. Follow a safe system of work.
2. Make proper use of equipment provided by the employer for safe manual handling.
3. Attend any training that is provided.
4. Not put themselves or others at risk.
5. Report any accidents or near misses in line with their company's policies.

### **Preventing back pain**

As well as the processes above there are actions you can take to prevent back pain in particular. These are:

1. Keep your weight within normal limits for your height, gender and age
2. Try to maintain a good posture during all activities e.g. standing, sitting and driving
3. Stretch and warm up before activity.
4. Stretching and exercise programmes can assist in building a strong back and a strong stomach to support it.
5. If you begin to experience back pain, stop the activity immediately and seek advice from your medical practitioner. If the pain occurred during a work activity report the incident according to your employer's policies.

### **Handling techniques**

Plan ahead

- Where am I going?
- What am I lifting?
- What are the options?
- Are there any aids available?
- Do I need help?
- Do I need to remove any obstructions?

**Feet**

- Am I wearing suitable footwear?
- Place your feet apart to give you a stable posture.
- Place one foot slightly forward towards the direction of travel.

**Posture**

- Keep the spine in its normal alignment
- Bend from the knees but do not over-flex them.
- Keep the shoulders and knees in normal alignment.
- Keep the shoulders level.

**Grip**

- Ensure you have a secure grip.
- Check for, and use, any suitable handholds.
- Consider if the load is likely to slip.
- Keep arms within the boundary of the body.

**Lift**

- Make the movement as smooth and consistent as possible
- Use the power of the legs
- Keep the load close to the body
- Keep the heaviest parts towards you
- If you need to turn, move your feet and do not twist your body