

Did you know?

Musculoskeletal Disorders

What are the hazards and risks with manual handling?

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are the most common workplace (occupational) illness in the UK, affecting around 439,000 workers in 2011/12. The most common areas of the body to be affected are the back, knees, neck and shoulders.

Construction work can cause short term sprains of the muscles but can also cause longer term damage to the joints, bones and nerves through constant use, resulting in wear and tear on the body.

When am I most at risk of damaging myself and getting a musculoskeletal disorder?

Construction has some of the highest rates of MSDs. The most common injuries are the result of pushing your body beyond its natural limits, but it doesn't always have to involve heavy weights. You are at risk of damaging yourself when carrying out:

- **Manual handling** – which includes lifting, lowering, pushing, pulling and carrying
- **Repetitive tasks** – harm can also result from doing a task repetitively (eg block laying, laying kerbs and paving slabs) even if the load is relatively light (eg bricklaying), or where the working environment isn't ideal, for example working in awkward positions or being cramped; working in a tight space, or when stretched; or when working overhead, (eg tying rebar, installing plasterboard or wiring/pipe work)

The risk of MSDs can increase when you are cold as the body becomes less flexible, meaning it will take a lot more energy to carry out the task, whether that is holding a position or moving. If your hands are cold then you could misjudge the amount of force needed and use too much.

What should my employer be doing?

Your employer should be trying to avoid hazards that cause MSDs. If this is not possible then your employer needs to carry out a risk assessment, starting with assessing the risk of manual handling then identifying ways to get rid of or reduce your exposure to manual handling, or repetitive tasks. **This can be done by thinking:**

- Does this load need to be handled at all?
- Can it be done in a different way?
- Can it be mechanised or automated?
- Can the load be broken down into smaller or lighter loads?

Once your employer has carried out a risk assessment then they must make sure that:

- Control measures are used, for example
 - Making sure lifting aids are used
 - Using correct manual handling techniques
 - Putting safe systems of work in place, including regular breaks and task rotation
- Providing you with relevant information and training on manual handling and its risks to your health
- If necessary, carrying out health surveillance

What health checks do I need?

Carrying out health checks, or surveillance, is important in detecting early signs of joint damage. For MSDs you can be given a questionnaire to fill in, asking simple questions; for example, how your back feels when you get up in the morning and whether you take a break from your work activity to have a stretch. If your answers show that you may have symptoms of an MSD then you may need to have further checks or an assessment. In the assessment with an occupational health adviser you may be asked more detailed questions and asked to do some exercises to measure your restricted movement.

What can I do to protect myself from musculoskeletal disorders?

- Always use mechanical handling equipment instead of manual handling if possible, eg forklifts/pallet trucks etc
- Warm up before starting to lift or handle materials
- Don't lift loads above shoulder height or in cramped areas
- Know your capabilities – can you handle the load or do you need assistance?
- Wear suitable clothing and personal protective equipment, such as gloves and safety boots, to protect against cuts, crushed toes etc
- Ensure there is sufficient space, suitable lighting and a clear route to where you are taking the load

What are the symptoms of MSDs and what do I need to do if I am concerned?

If you have any of the symptoms below then you may need to change the way you work until things have improved. Symptoms include:

- Regular pain, aching, discomfort, numbness, tingling and swelling in your back or other joints and muscles
- Areas of your back often feeling tender
- Limited movement in your back, with tightness or tenderness in your muscles
- Back pain during inactivity
- Pain in your buttocks/running down the backs of your legs

Don't forget that manual handling can make an existing injury worse. So if you have a sports injury, for example from football or rugby, then you may have to change your working practice until you are fully recovered.

Remember, if you are suffering from a MSD:

- *You may not be able to carry out certain tasks or physical work, which may affect your future ability to work*
- *You may not be able to continue everyday activities, including simple things such as playing sport or even doing up your shoelaces*
- *You may have constant pain or discomfort*
- *If you don't seek advice about your injury then it could result, in the most serious cases, in permanent disability*

If you are worried you may have a MSD, it's important to speak to your manager or the occupational health nurse or doctor.

For general advice you can contact CBH on 0845 873 7726

Useful links

HSE website at: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/>

CBH website at: www.cbhscheme.com

Fit for Work website at: fitforwork.org