



Is your back safe?

Advice on preventing back pain

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Manual handling is one of the biggest causes of accidents to employees at the University, causing a range of different injuries, such as crushing, cuts or bruises. However injuries are the “tip of the iceberg” as many people suffer from musculoskeletal disorders such as back pain through the cumulative effect over time of lifting, carrying, stooping, bending, stretching and twisting at work and at home. National statistics produced by the HSE (Health and Safety Executive) for 2014 showed that 909 000 working days were lost in the UK due to handling injuries making it a significant cause of work-related illness.

It is estimated that four out of every five adults will experience back pain at some stage in their life. Most people with acute back pain will recover within 6 weeks. However up to 7% of people with acute back pain will develop chronic back pain, resulting in prolonged discomfort that can significantly affect their quality of life.

There are many factors that contribute to back pain. At work it is most common in work tasks that involve:

- lifting, pushing or pulling heavy or bulky loads;
- carrying loads awkwardly, possibly one handed;
- stretching, twisting and reaching;
- repetitive tasks such as computer work;
- stooping, bending or crouching (poor posture);
- working beyond normal abilities and limits;
- working when physically tired;
- working for prolonged periods in one position (e.g. long distance driving, or computer work).

Preventing back pain as a result of manual handling

For the majority of office based University employees the risk arises from manual handling activities, such as carrying teaching materials, laptops, handling files or office equipment, or rearranging tables and chairs.

If you are regularly required to carry out tasks which involve lifting and handling, your manager should have carried out a risk assessment, so ask to see the assessment and follow the safe system of work provided to protect you. You may also need to attend a kinetic manual handling course.

If there is the possibility of injury, consider whether the manual handling activity can be avoided. For example, do the item/s need to be handled at all or could the work be done in a different way? Are lifting aids available? Speak to your manager if you are unsure how to proceed safely.



Otherwise, follow these simple tips:

■ **Perform your own “on-the spot” risk assessment:** Think ‘TILE’:

- **Task:** for example can you reorganise storage, so that heavy equipment can be handled at waist height? Can you carry out the task whilst maintaining a good posture?
- **Individual capability:** Never attempt to lift anything beyond your capability. Take particular care if you are pregnant or have had back problems in the past.
- **Load:** is it heavy, bulky or difficult to grasp? Can you reduce the weight or put it in something with handholds, to help you handle it more safely. If the weight is uneven, keep the centre of gravity close to your body.
- **Environment:** Will you need to negotiate stairs or doors, potential slip or trip hazards or an untidy storage area? Is there sufficient lighting to see where you are going?

■ **Test the weight before lifting:** If it is too heavy, stop and ask for assistance or break the load down into more manageable amounts. Do not try to carry too much in one go.

■ **Get help:**

- You are not expected to move heavy equipment such as desks or IT equipment. The University has trained staff who can help you. For the **Colchester Campus** contact the Cleaning and Portering Service via the Estate Management helpdesk. At **Southend** Facilities Management staff will help you and at **Loughton** contact the Campus Supervisor.
- For lighter tasks, ask a work colleague to help you.

■ **Keep storage areas tidy:** try to store heavy and frequently used items at waist height.

■ **Use lifting and carrying aids:** For example use trolleys or sack barrows to help you move boxes, or a rucksack for transporting a laptop. If you regularly need to carry equipment and do not have suitable carrying aids, speak to your manager who will discuss your needs with you and, if necessary arrange for suitable equipment to be provided. (NB: *Tesco shopping trolleys are not suitable and belong to Tesco's!*)

■ **Look after your back:** Good back care is not only about preventing back pain, but also about keeping your back fit and healthy, so that you recover quickly should a back injury occur. Have a look at advice from Backcare (www.backcare.org.uk) on preventing back pain.



How to contact us:

Health and Safety Advisory Service

T (01206 87) 2944

E safety@essex.ac.uk

Occupational Health Service

T (01206 87) 2399

E ohquery@essex.ac.uk

For more detailed information on a wide range of health and safety topics, visit the University's Health and Safety web pages at www.essex.ac.uk/health-safety.

