

# BACK PAIN AT WORK: A GUIDE FOR PEOPLE AT WORK AND THEIR EMPLOYERS

- Back pain is the largest single reported cause of absence from work

## **This Guide helps ...**

- Employees - to stay active, recover quickly and avoid disability.
- Employers - to care for your employees and help them stay in work or return quickly.

***Working together  
to beat the problem***



British Occupational  
Health Research  
Foundation



Faculty of  
Occupational  
Medicine

## **About this guide**

Lower back pain is a major cause of discomfort and absence from work. When pain causes problems with work; employers and employees want to know what to do.

This brief guide tells you what you can do and who can help you. It gives some important new facts about the treatment of back pain, based on the latest scientific and medical information.

More detailed guidance is available for GPs and occupational health advisers helping them to give you the best possible advice.

## **The Reality**

### **Each year:**

- 40% of the population are affected by back pain.
- 50 million working days are lost.
- It costs about £5 billion (or £200 for every employee) in sickness absence costs.

*Source: Clinical Standards Advisory Group*

Not all back pain is caused by work - but factors at work which may trigger it, or make it worse, are some of the easiest to tackle effectively. Employers also have a legal responsibility to prevent harm from work.

For people with back pain inactivity and bed rest increase the chance of disability - an active approach to treatment and return to work brings benefits to everyone.

## Employers - What can you do?

### At the Workplace

- Consultation is important. Involve employees / trade unions when you develop measures to combat back pain:

This joint approach has proved effective in reducing the impact of back pain at work.

Together with your staff / trade unions, review the need for any workplace back care or occupational health advice. An adviser can help you to improve all aspects of back pain management and put you in touch with the rest of the health care system.

- Ensure that work activities are comfortable and not making unreasonable physical demands:

*The Manual Handling Regulations (1992)* and the *Display Screen Equipment Regulations (1992)* and associated guidance explain how to do this, as well as defining your legal duties.

Discuss pace, load and rotation of work with experienced workers / trade union safety representatives and with occupational health or back care advisers.

- Research shows that some widely used approaches do not work:

There are no valid methods of pre-placement screening which detect those at risk.

A history of back pain should not generally be a reason for refusing employment.

Lumbar supports (back belts) do not protect against back pain.

- Explain that you want to help people recover. Encourage early reporting of back pain if it is causing problems at work:

Set up a system which deals promptly with reports of back pain.

Review these reports to see if your prevention measures can be improved.

If anyone reporting back pain is seeing their GP, either write a note or suggest that they tell the GP that you are ready to support treatment aimed at a rapid return to full activities. This will usually be based on the Royal College of General Practitioners guidelines.

- Talk with people who have back pain. Discuss whether their job needs to be adapted to help them return quickly to

- Full activities. Consider solutions such as rest pauses, task rotation, handling aids and extra help from colleagues.

Make sure the work can be done safely.

Give help with particular tasks if the job cannot be changed.

Don't insist on freedom from pain before someone resumes normal work - it may delay recovery.

Keep a check on progress and be prepared to make further adjustments.

### **Someone is absent**

- Make contact as soon as possible and keep in touch with them until return. Tell them you are ready to help if necessary.
- Arrange a meeting to discuss how their job could be adapted temporarily to help them return to full activities. Stress that you want to help recovery. Keep in mind that inactivity and bed rest can lead to the development of disability.
- Ask if you can have consent to contact their GP to discuss how you might help with plans for return to work.

### **Absence of more than 4 weeks**

- The emphasis should change to an active programme of rehabilitation.

If you have access to an occupational health adviser ask them to sort out arrangements.

The longer the time off work the greater the chance of damage to long term quality of life. The chance of ever returning to work also reduces (50% of people return at six months, and only 5% after one year).

The effectiveness of rehabilitation reduces rapidly the longer it is delayed.

Some NHS Trusts provide rehabilitation programmes.

- Find out if the NHS can provide what you need locally. If not, it may be possible to make arrangements with your employers' liability or private medical insurer. It is best to do this before an urgent need arises.
- Liaise with the rehabilitation team to find the best way of supporting a return to work.

## Employees - Do you have back pain?

- Back pain is common: it often settles down quickly and usually doesn't mean your back is damaged.
- In many cases taking time off work won't help. In fact, inactivity can make the problem worse.
- If back pain is causing you problems at work report this to your employer. Work together on possible ways to deal with it:
  - see if your normal work can be done in a better way e.g. by better handling methods, and use of mechanical aids.
  - until you can resume with normal work, is there anything else you can do which is easier for your back?
  - if you have access to an occupational health or back care adviser at work they can give you advice based on carefully researched guidelines. If not and your pain is recurring and causing problems see your General Practitioner who also has research based guidelines.
- If you have to be off work don't stop using your back, and don't stay in bed, unless your doctor tells you to. Inactivity or bed rest can make your back worse.
- *The Back Book* (published by The Stationery Office) has helpful advice on back pain. Your GP or employer may be able to give you a copy, or you can order it from a book shop.

## More information

- Guidelines for occupational health and workplace back care advisers are available in a free leaflet, *Occupational Health Guidelines for the Management of Low Back Pain at Work*. Copies from: The Faculty of Occupational Medicine, 6 St Andrew's Place, Regent's Park, London NW1 4LB. (A4 stamped addressed envelope required).
- A review of the evidence by Prof. Gordon Waddell and Prof. Kim Burton together with more detailed recommendations prepared by an inter-professional working group and published by the Faculty of Occupational Medicine on which the above guidelines are based, is available at £15 per copy subject to payment with order from the same address as above. Also at: <http://www.facocmed.ac.uk>.
- Guidelines for GPs are available from: The Royal College of General Practitioners, 14 Prince's Gate, Hyde Park, London SW7 1PU. Also at <http://www.rcgp.org.uk>.

*Sponsorship for the review, the professional guidelines and this guide was provided by Blue Circle Industries PLC, through the British Occupational Health Research Foundation and the Faculty of Occupational Medicine, as their 1999 Community Project of the Year.*

MARCH 2000