

Workplace safety - manual handling injuries

One in three injuries to Australian workers are caused by manual handling, with inexperienced workers at greatest risk.

Manual handling injuries are not limited to those sustained by lifting or carrying heavy loads. A person can be injured when handling objects in a variety of ways including pulling, pushing, holding or restraining. The object can be anything from an animal to a piece of equipment.

Good posture and lifting techniques can help reduce the risks, but research indicates that making changes to workplace design is the most effective way to prevent manual handling injury.

Identifying the hazards

Some factors in the workplace may increase the risk of an injury occurring. These hazards can be identified in different ways:

- Walk through the workplace and look for potential hazards.
- Talk over risk factors with workers.
- Check through injury records to help pinpoint recurring problems.
- Regularly monitor and update risk identification.

A detailed process, including manual handling regulations and the code of practice for manual handling, is available from WorkSafe Victoria.

Assessing the risks

The next step is to assess which factors are contributing to the risk of injury.

Typical risk factors include:

- **Type of work** – working in a fixed posture for a prolonged period of time can increase the risk of injury.
- **Layout of the workspace** – a cramped or poorly designed workspace can increase the risk of injury by forcing people to assume awkward postures, such as bending or twisting.
- **Weight of an object** – a heavy load may be difficult to lift and carry and can increase the risk of injury.
- **Location of an object** – heavy objects that have to be lifted awkwardly, for example above shoulder height or from below knee level, can increase the risk of injury.
- **Duration and frequency** – increasing the number of times an object is handled or the length of time for which it is handled can increase the chance of injury.
- **Condition of an object** – more effort may be required to manipulate badly designed or poorly maintained equipment
- **Awkward loads** – loads that are difficult to grasp, slippery or an awkward shape can increase the risk of injury.
- **Handling a live person or animal** – lifting or restraining a person or animal can cause sprains and other injuries.

Reducing or eliminating the risk

After identifying workplace hazards and controlling the risks, you can do several things to reduce the risk of manual handling injuries. These tips can help reduce injury at home as well as at work.

Safety suggestions include:

- **Change the task** - does this task need to be carried out? If so, does it have to be done this way?
- **Change the object** – for example, repack a heavy load into smaller parcels.
- **Change the workspace** – for example, use ergonomic furniture and make sure work benches are at optimum heights to limit bending or stretching.
- **Use mechanical aids** – like wheelbarrows, conveyor belts, cranes or forklifts.
- **Change the nature of the work** – for example, offer frequent breaks or the chance to do different tasks.
- **Offer proper training** – inexperienced workers are more likely to be injured.

Protecting your back

The back is particularly vulnerable to manual handling injuries. Safety suggestions include:

- Warm up cold muscles with gentle stretches before engaging in any manual work.
- Lift and carry heavy loads correctly by keeping the load close to the body and lifting with the thigh muscles.
- Never attempt to lift or carry loads if you think they are too heavy.
- Pushing a load (using your body weight to assist) will be less stressful on your body than pulling a load.
- Use mechanical aids or get help to lift or carry a heavy load whenever possible.
- Organise the work area to reduce the amount of bending, twisting and stretching required.
- Take frequent breaks.
- Cool down after heavy work with gentle, sustained stretches.
- Exercise regularly to strengthen muscles and ligaments.
- Lose any excess body fat to improve fitness.

Professional advice

Your workplace occupational health and safety coordinator can give you advice about managing the risks associated with manual handling.

Organisations such as WorkSafe Victoria or unions can offer information and advice on modifying the workplace or work practices to reduce the risk of manual handling injuries.

Where to get help

- Your manager or supervisor
- Your elected Health and Safety Representative and your workplace occupational health and safety coordinator
- Your doctor
- WorkSafe Victoria Tel. (03) 9641 1444 or 1800 136 089 (toll free) - for general enquiries
- WorkSafe Victoria Emergency Response Line Tel. 13 23 60 - to report **serious workplace emergencies**, seven days, 24 hours

Things to remember

- One in three injuries to Australian workers are caused by manual handling.
- Changing workplace design is an effective way to prevent manual handling injuries.
- There are organisations that can offer information and advice on modifying the workplace or work practices.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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