

MANUAL HANDLING

Every year thousands of workers suffer painful injuries while performing manual handling tasks at work, at home and while doing a wide range of other activities. These injuries include sprains, strains, back injuries, hernias and soft tissue damage. This costs hundreds of millions of dollars in compensation and associated rehabilitation costs. The full cost of lost productivity and the social, family and personal impacts are unmeasurable but huge.

Manual handling includes activities such as:

- Pushing.
- Pulling.
- Holding.
- Lifting.
- Carrying.
- Restraining.

It also includes repetitive tasks such as:

- Packing.
- Typing.
- Assembling.
- Cleaning and sorting.
- Using hand tools.
- Operating machinery and equipment.

Our bodies can cope with the thousands of physical movements and activities these tasks involve. However most of us have experienced lifting something awkwardly, or doing too much digging without taking a break and the pain we feel tells us we have gone beyond the safe limit of our muscles, joints, ligaments etc.

Legislation has been in place for some years now which requires employers to:

- Identify hazardous manual handling tasks in the workplace.
- To assess the risk associated with performing these tasks.
- To control (introduce ways to eliminate or reduce) the risks of injury or harm to those who are required to use manual handling.

Hazardous manual handling means manual handling that involves any of the following:

- Repetitive or sustained application of force. For example: lifting & stacking goods onto a pallet, typing, pushing or pulling a trolley.
- Repetitive or sustained awkward posture. For example: leaning over to bath a patient, reaching sideways to pick-up goods.
- Repetitive or sustained movement. For example – painting or assembly work.
- Application of high force. For example – lifting a heavy item from a high shelf.
- Exposure to sustained vibration. For example – operating earth moving plant, using chainsaws or jack hammers.
- Handling people or live animals.
- Handling of loads that are unstable, unbalanced or difficult to move. For example lifting a sack of flour or carrying a ladder.

The first step in preventing manual handling injuries is to identify the tasks that involve hazardous manual handling. The next step is to work out if those injuries have the potential to cause a musculoskeletal disorder (MSD). MSD is an injury, illness or disease that arises in whole or in part from manual handling in the workplace. It includes repetitive strain injury, muscle sprains and strains, hernias, chronic pain and other soft tissue damage.

Once we have identified those tasks in our workplace where we perform manual handling and have defined those activities which could create hazardous manual handling and subsequent MSD's we can assess whether the risks are created by either:

- The postures, movements and forces involved in the task; for example bending, twisting, grabbing, picking, very fast movements, exerting force with one hand or one side of the body.
- The duration and frequency of the task and any environmental factors. For example: heat, cold and vibration that act directly on the person carrying out the task.



Once we have identified and assessed the risks associated with the manual handling task we can then look at ways of reducing or eliminating those risks. So we move from risk identification and assessment, i.e. what and where the risk is to how serious it is and how we control it.

Control requires us to first try to eliminate the risk or how best to reduce it to the greatest extent possible. Wherever possible eliminating the manual handling task that creates the risk will be the most effective way of protecting employee's health and safety. We need to ask if the manual handling is really necessary or if there is another way of doing the job using appliances or devices, that doesn't involve manual handling. For example some sectors in the health industry have implemented a "no lift" policy. This isn't always practical, but the law requires that if it is practical and cost-effective, then we should investigate and implement those methods whenever possible. Reducing the level and seriousness of the risk where we can't eliminate the manual handling may be the only practical alternative.

The following sequence of considerations may be useful:

- Alter the workplace, workplace layout, workstation design or the working position of employees.
- Alter environmental conditions. For example changing the work height by introducing lift tables, positioning frequently used controls, equipment and tools in front of the employee, storing items below shoulder height.
- Alter the systems of work. For example making sure that employees perform tasks that allow a variety of postures and movements, including a mixture of sitting and standing tasks, using team handling, altering the pace and flow of work.
- Changing the objects used in the manual handling task. For example modifying tools and equipment, reducing the weight of the object handled, using balancers and other tool supports.
- Using mechanical aids. If none of these solutions are available, employees need to be provided with information, instruction and training in manual handling techniques. This training needs to be specific to the task and workplace where the manual handling is performed.

Summary and Conclusions

Incorrect manual handling causes serious injuries and costs millions of dollars. The purpose of the Manual Handling Regulations is to have us systematically look at our workplaces and work practices to identify and either eliminate or reduce the hazards that have the potential to cause us harm.

It is important to take time to find out the following:

- What manual handling tasks does the job involve?
- Could performing these tasks lead to a musculoskeletal disorder?
- With whom can they discuss their ideas to reduce the risk of manual handling injuries?
- Is there a procedure in the workplace for dealing with manual handling problems?
- Are mechanical aids available to assist with manual handling?
- Is there a procedure in place for maintaining these mechanical aids?
- Is training in the use of these aids available?

Questions:

1. Can you name three kinds of activities involving manual handling?

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2. Can you name three types of tasks which are repetitive?

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3. What two things create manual handling risks?

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4. What three things do the Manual Handling Regulations expect us to do?

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5. What can we use (sometimes) to eliminate manual handling injuries?

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