

## POEL9D Caring for your back



*Back pain affects all industries, not just a few high-risk sectors. In 2013/14, over 31 million of working days were lost as a direct result of musculo-skeletal issues, including*

### Who gets back pain?

Many of us will suffer from back pain at some point in our lives, but for the most part, it is rarely serious and is likely to disappear within a relatively short space of time. Some people are more susceptible to back pain than others. In many cases, people manage the symptoms with pain relief and take a short-term break from strenuous activity without having to consult a GP. However, problems can recur, and in some cases, additional treatment is necessary.

It is important to look after your back for the long-term and to do what you can to reduce the risk of getting it in the first place. As this resource will show you, in many cases, this can be done by **adopting good posture day-to-day when standing and sitting**, and by **ensuring you use the correct techniques for lifting loads**.

### What can cause back pain in the workplace?

[Back pain in the workplace](#) can arise in many situations, though it does not necessarily mean that there is a serious underlying cause, nor that the situation cannot be improved by taking some simple steps. **Back pain tends to be more common in tasks that involve:**

- Heavy manual labour/lifting
- Manual handling in awkward places, such as delivery work
- Repetitive tasks, such as manual packing of goods
- Sitting at a workstation for long periods of time
- Working for long periods within a desk set-up that is not correctly arranged or adjusted to fit the individual
- Driving long distances or driving over rough ground, particularly if the seat is inadequately sprung
- Operating heavy equipment, such as an excavator, which can lead to excessive jolting and jarring

Physical activities that can aggravate back pain, or at least be more difficult to perform when you have back pain, include:

- Stooping, bending or crouching, including having poor posture when working at PCs
- Lifting objects which are too heavy or bulky, or carrying objects awkwardly
- Pushing, pulling or dragging excessively heavy loads
- Working beyond normal abilities and limits, and when physically overtired
- Using poor lift techniques
- Stretching, twisting and reaching
- Prolonged periods sitting in one position, leading to postural strain
- Situations where the whole body is subjected to vibration, jolting and jarring

## How to manage back pain symptoms

**Pain control** – Paracetamol provides effective pain relief, as does Ibuprofen and Aspirin. Both Ibuprofen and Aspirin are non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) which should not be taken on an empty stomach, as [NSAIDs have been linked to stomach ulcers](#). If you have a history of stomach ulcers, do not take Ibuprofen, Aspirin or other NSAIDs. In addition, Aspirin should not be given to children under 16 years of age except when advised by a GP, as it has been linked to [Reyes syndrome](#).

**Stay active** – in the past, the accepted response to back pain was bed rest. However, [evidence now shows](#) that rest does not help recovery, and that the longer someone is off work with back pain, the less likely they are to ever go back. It is much better to keep to normal levels of day-to-day activity, including returning to work as soon as possible and using simple pain relief if needed. A gradual return to work, with modified tasks, is more likely to aid recovery.

**Physiotherapy** – particularly if someone experiences back pain following an accident, they may benefit from [physiotherapy](#) to speed recovery.

**Stay positive** – there is growing evidence that your mood can affect your recovery, and that people who are positive about the prospects of getting better actually do get better more quickly. Conversely, [negative thoughts can delay recovery](#).

## When back pain is severe

For those with back pain that continues to get worse, it is important to consult a GP to rule out any [more severe underlying causes](#). For example, you should see your GP straightaway if you have:

- Difficulty passing or controlling urine or bowel movements, including urinary incontinence or bowel incontinence
- Numbness around your genitals or anus

- Numbness, pins and needles or weakness in both legs
- Unsteadiness on your feet

### **Ten top tips for a healthy back**

1. Keep active. Walking, swimming, pilates, yoga and cycling are excellent ways of strengthening back muscles.
2. Smoking has been shown to increase the risk of back pain; if you smoke, stop or cut down.
3. Dehydration has been linked to back pain so drink plenty of water (at least a litre a day).
4. Being overweight can exacerbate back problems, so lose weight if you need to.
5. Warm up before any physical activity, including leisure activities (e.g. gardening or golf).
6. [Think before you lift](#), whether at home or in the workplace - for example:
  - Lifting and carrying objects close to your body will avoid unnecessary back strain.
  - When you lift it's better to slightly bend your back, hips and knees.
  - Avoid twisting or leaning sideways, especially when your back is bent.
7. Carrying loads in a rucksack will better distribute weight evenly over the back. Avoid carrying a single heavy bag on one shoulder or in one hand as it will put unequal pressure on one side of your body. Balance the load and your body better by spreading the weight between two bags instead.
8. Maintain a good posture at home and at work by not slumping in your chair, not being hunched over a desk and not walking around with your shoulders hunched over. Good posture encourages your muscles, joints and ligaments to work properly.
9. In the office, always use a chair with a suitable backrest and sit with your feet flat on the floor, or flat on a footrest. Don't cradle a telephone handset with your neck while you type – if you're using a telephone for extended periods of time, use a headset. Always make sure your desk and keyboard are at the correct height.
10. Choose your mattress carefully. A rough rule of thumb is that when you lie on your back, you should be able to fit a hand in the lumbar curve at the bottom of your back. If your hand won't fit, the mattress may be too soft; if the gap is too big for your hand, the mattress may be too firm.

### **Additional resources**

[HSE Guide to lifting safely](#)

### **NHS Choices**

[Guide to back pain](#)

[Preventing back pain](#)

[How to sit correctly](#)

[Correct lifting techniques](#)

[Common posture mistakes and fixes](#)

[The importance of staying positive about back pain](#)

[Workstation exercises](#)

[Back stretches](#)