



Building Better Backs

Everyone has a back. Everyone uses it in some way each day. Everyone is at risk of back injury.

The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) found in 2006 the estimated cost of work-related ill health in Northern Ireland is approximately €330 million each year. A "significant proportion" of this was attributed to back pain.

These findings instigated Backs NI – Northern Ireland's largest ever jointly conducted health and safety inspection initiative.

The aim was to create awareness of back injury and support businesses in providing manual handling and lifting training to employees.

Many people have benefited from such training. But with a significant number still suffering from back-related injuries, reinforcement of back care advice for Northern Ireland's workforce has never been more important.

Claire Savage speaks with back care experts and related professionals.

Research shows that eight out of ten people will suffer from some form of back-related injury in their lives.

Manual handling co-ordinator for the Western Health and Social Service Board (WHSSB) Pauline Lavery says, "One in three people get hurt due to lifting and handling. Of this, 50% occur in health service jobs.

"We are trying to push that statistic down."

Orthopaedic consultant at Derry's Altnagelvin hospital – Mr Charlwood – says 20% of his referrals are due to back pain.

Ms Lavery stresses the health sector is not the only industry affected by back injury. Training is therefore provided for all types of work.

She says, "Posture can be a problem. Prolonged sitting can lead to lower back problems."

Many people may not adjust seats properly and end up straining their backs.

She says, "People don't associate back and musculoskeletal injuries with sedentary work."

Within manual handling training, advice and information about backs and general care is given.

Ms Lavery says, "How the spine works and how it can be damaged" is explained. Practical participation is included in the training to ensure people have understood the advice and can apply it effectively.

Incorporating back care into all areas of life – both at work and at home – is vital.

Ms Lavery says, "Quite a few people have come back and said they have felt the benefit at home and at work. It doesn't stop them doing their activities – they just go about them a different way.

"People also pass on the information to their family."

Orthopaedic consultant Mr Charlwood deals with acute back injuries.

He says, "With the increase of handling and safety

at work legislation, the number of back referrals haven't really changed.

"I think it is sensible (manual handling training), but I am not convinced it is stopping people with acute onset of back pain.

"People don't always apply the training particularly well."

Back injuries can arise from one-off incidents or simply from poor everyday back care.

Mr Charlwood advises taking general care of the lower back prior and post injury.

He says a generalised level of fitness is important and recommends strengthening core muscles and doing basic stomach work.

Fitness instructor Aaron Wright agrees. He says, "Any resistance (weight) training and stomach exercises help.

"These exercises strengthen and tighten core muscles, including the lower back."

To maintain fitness levels Mr Wright says, "Any cardiovascular exercise such as swimming, walking or cycling is good."

"This helps strengthen the heart and lungs and promotes greater blood flow around the body."

He adds, "A balanced diet is key. Fruit and vegetables, wholegrains, slow-release foods and essential fats are vital for a healthy everyday lifestyle."

Post injury, Mr Wright recommends swimming and low/non-impact sports.

"Core exercises are good and certain stretches before and after are beneficial. Also, using resistance helps range of movement and strengthens the lower back."

If people think they have a back injury Mr Charlwood says simple exercises may sometimes be enough to alleviate the pain. He advises against bed-rest.

"This will weaken the back muscle tone and make it worse. If it doesn't settle, then see the GP."

A project recently launched in Derry to help people with existing back injuries is the Condition Management Programme (CMP) – part of the Pathways to Work (PtW) initiative.

Co-ordinator Lorna Ackroyd says it aims to help people on incapacity benefit return to work following back injury.

Although 90% of those off work with back injuries want to return. In reality, only 40% actually do.

People can join the programme through a Pathways Personal Advisor (PPA) or a Disablement Employment Advisor (DEA) at the Jobs and Benefits office.

Don't take the risk You might slip a disc



Look after your back at work



Mrs Ackroyd says many people fail to return to work due to other factors arising from their initial back injury e.g. depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and low self-confidence.

CMP addresses such issues through advice and guidance rather than 'treatment'. People take responsibility for their own health and are given the confidence and motivation to return to work.

Condition Management Practitioner - Jane Smith – tells the story of a man who has recently benefited from the programme.

She says, "He had experienced back pain due to osteoarthritis for three years. He really enjoyed using his computer but couldn't sit at it for more than ten minutes at a time.

"With advice, he was able to change his seating and positioning and could sit at his computer for a reasonable amount of time."

She says his sleep and self-esteem also improved and he was able to take his dogs for walks again.

Ms Smith says, "His ability to do everyday activities had improved."

Prevention of back injury at work still affects many people but there are services in place to help with all stages of back care. Hopefully, with increased awareness and application of advice, 2008 will be a year of 'better backs'...

For more information visit:

www.backcare.org.uk

www.backcare-helpline.org

www.hse.gov.uk/betterbacks

www.hse.gov.uk/msd/back