

# Manual handling and back pain *in the public sector*

a survey for UNISON  
by the Labour Research Department  
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# UNISON survey of manual handling and back pain in the public sector

## Summary of the main findings

- u Nearly a quarter of respondents (24%) said that they regularly experienced back pain either at work or at the end of the working day. This increased to over a third (36%) of ambulance workers, almost a third of care workers (32%), 31% of nurses and 30% of catering, laundry, portering, cleaning and domestic staff.
- u A further 57% of all respondents said that they sometimes experienced back pain. In total, therefore, 81% of all workers in the survey said that they regularly or sometimes experience work-related back pain.
- u Forty three percent of those carrying out manual handling for periods of more than an hour throughout the day reported that they regularly experienced back pain either at work or at the end of the working day.
- u More than half of those (53%) who reported that they regularly lifted people, heavy pieces of equipment or heavy boxes alone said that they regularly experienced work-related back pain. Many respondents felt that inadequate staffing levels were to blame.
- u Many of the respondents reported that their working environments contributed to the risk of manual handling injury. More than a third of respondents (38%) said that there was insufficient space for safe manual handling procedures, and over a quarter (26%) said that there were slippery, cluttered or uneven floor surfaces at their workplace. Twenty eight percent said there were variations in levels of floor (such as steps to negotiate), 21% said that there were extremes of temperature or humidity, and 16% said that there was poor lighting.
- u Although a number of older respondents put their back pain down to their age and wear and tear, the survey found a stronger correlation between the length of service and work-related back pain, than between age and work-related back pain.
- u More than one in five (21%) of those experiencing back pain at work or at the end of the working day had taken time off work due to work-related back pain in the last 12 months.
- u Of those who had taken time off work due to work-related back pain, nearly a quarter (24%) had taken more than 20 days in the last 12 months.

- u Training provision varied across occupations. Although 97% of ambulance workers, 93% of care workers, and 92% of nurses and nursing assistants reported that they have received training in safe handling or lifting, this was the case with only 32% of nursery nurses and classroom assistants, 59% of catering, laundry, portering, cleaning and domestic staff and 46% of other manual workers.
  
- u Forty four percent of respondents had not been told how to report manual handling problems and more than half (57%) had not been told to report back pain as well as manual handling accidents to their employer.

## Response rate and background information

A questionnaire survey was circulated to a random sample of 10,000 public services union, Unison, members. Almost 1,000 (973) people responded to the survey representing around a 10% response rate.

Forty four percent of the respondents worked for a local authority, 42% (423) worked for a health authority 42% (405) and 6% (61) worked for a university, college or other educational establishment. In addition, 15 people worked for a private health care provider, 3 worked for a private social care provider, and 1 worked for a voluntary organisation. Thirty seven respondents worked for a variety of other employers and 28 respondents did not state what kind of employer they worked for.

## Occupational breakdown of respondents

<b>Job title</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Nurse/nursing assistant	170	18%
Care worker	136	14%
Administrative/clerical work	110	11%
Catering/laundry/portering/cleaner/domestic	103	11%
Other manual work	66	7%
Local government officer	37	4%
Nursery nurse/classroom	37	4%
Other medical profession	35	4%
Ambulance worker	29	3%
Librarian/library assistant	23	2%
Technician	22	2%
Other occupations	143	
Occupation not specified	62	
Total number of respondents	973	

Thirty eight percent of respondents were in the 45 to 54 age group, with 25% aged between 35 and 44, 20% aged between 55 and 64 and 13% were aged between 25 and 34. 1% were aged under 24 and 0.3% over 65, with 2% of respondents not specifying their age.

Over half the respondents had worked in their job for more than 10 years; with 23% having been in their job for between 5 and 10 years; 13% for between 2 and 5 years and 8% less than 2 years.

## Manual handling tasks at work

Eighty seven percent of survey respondents said that their work involved manual handling. Forty three percent said that their work involved lifting, holding or carrying people, 49% said that they lifted, carried or held heavy objects, 36% said that their job involved lifting, holding or carrying of awkward loads, 17% said they carried out lifting, holding or carrying of hot, sharp or otherwise hazardous loads, and 64% said that their work involved frequent stooping, bending, stretching or twisting.

Almost a quarter (23%) said that they carried out manual handling work for periods of more than an hour throughout the day, 34% carried out manual handling for short periods throughout the day and 24% said that they carried out manual handling work occasionally.

Over a third of respondents (38%) said that they regularly had to lift heavy objects, such as people, heavy pieces of equipment or heavy boxes alone.

## Work-related back pain

Nearly a quarter of respondents (24%) said that they regularly experienced back pain either at work or at the end of the working day. This increased to over a third (36%) of ambulance workers, almost a third of care workers (32%), 31% of nurses and 30% of catering, laundry, portering, cleaning and domestic staff.

Fifty-seven percent of all respondents said that they sometimes experienced back pain. In total, therefore, 81% of workers in the survey say that they regularly or sometimes experienced work-related back pain.

## Occupational breakdown of those reporting work-related back pain

<b>Job title</b>	<b>Proportion reporting that they regularly experience work-related back pain</b>
Ambulance worker	35%
Care worker	32%
Nurse/nursing assistant	31%
Catering/laundry/portering/cleaning/ domestic staff	30%
Other manual work	29%
Nursery nurse/classroom assistant	27%
Technician	23%
Administrative/clerical worker	16%
Other medical professional	14%
Librarian/library assistant	13%
Local government officer	11%

## Work-related back pain and age of worker

The proportion of workers in each age group experiencing back pain either at work or at the end of the working day is summarised below:

Age of respondent	Experience of work-related back pain		
	Regularly	Sometimes	Regularly/Sometimes
15-24	25%	67%	92%
25-34	20%	62%	82%
35-44	24%	56%	80%
45-54	25%	58%	83%
55-64	23%	56%	79%
65+	33%	67%	100%

## Work-related back pain and length of service

The proportion of workers experiencing back pain either at work or at the end of the working day compared with length of service is summarised below:

Length of service	Experience of work-related back pain	
	Regularly	Sometimes
Less than 2 years	15%	60%
2-5 years	21%	61%
5-10 years	19%	55%
More than 10 years	28%	65%

A number of older respondents put their back pain down to their age and wear and tear. But the survey found a stronger correlation between the length of service and work-related back pain, than between age and work-related back pain.

## Work-related back pain and the amount and type of manual handling work

Where respondents said that they carried out manual handling for periods of more than an hour throughout the day, the proportion reporting that they regularly experienced back pain either at work or at the end of the working day increased to 43%. This compared with 20% of respondents who carried out manual handling for short periods throughout the day, and 17% of those who said that they occasionally carried out manual handling work.

More than half of those (53%) who reported that they regularly lifted people, heavy pieces of equipment or heavy boxes alone said that they regularly experienced work-related back pain.

Staffing problems were frequently cited as a problem at the workplace in relation to manual handling problems. For example, one school site manager reported: “Most manual handling problems occur because of severe under staffing problems”.

Of the 794 respondents who said that they did experience back pain at work or at the end of the working day, 80% said that they thought this was related to their work. Almost all ambulance workers (96%) and almost 90% of nurses and care workers thought that their back pain was work-related.

Work involving lifting, holding or carrying hot, sharp or otherwise hazardous loads, and frequent stooping, bending, stretching or twisting was slightly more strongly associated with experiencing work-related back pain than other types of manual handling work. Almost a third of those carrying out work involving this reported that they regularly experienced back pain either at work or at the end of the working day (see table below).

Proportion of workers reporting work-related back pain compared to the type of manual handling work being carried out

<b>Type of manual handling work being carried out</b>	<b>Proportion of workers reporting back pain</b>		
	<b>regularly</b>	<b>sometimes</b>	<b>never</b>
Lifting, holding or carrying people	30%	58%	12%
Lifting, holding or carrying heavy objects	28%	59%	12%
Lifting, holding or carrying awkward loads	28%	60%	11%
Lifting, holding or carrying hot, sharp or otherwise hazardous loads	32%	58%	9%
Frequent stooping, bending, stretching or twisting	31%	59%	8%

One in five (20%) of those experiencing work-related back pain attributed this to lifting, holding or carrying people, 19% to lifting, holding or carrying heavy objects, 15% to lifting, holding or carrying awkward loads, 35% to lifting holding or carrying hot, sharp or otherwise hazardous loads, and 34% attributed it to frequent stooping, bending, stretching or twisting.

### **The working environment**

Many of the respondents reported that their working environments contributed to the risk of manual handling injuries occurring. More than a third of respondents (38%) said that there was insufficient space for safe manual handling procedures, and over a quarter (26%) said that there were slippery, cluttered or uneven floor surfaces at their workplace. Twenty eight percent said there were variations in levels of floor (such as steps to negotiate), 21% said that there were extremes of temperature or humidity, and 16% said that there was poor lighting.

Many respondents reported that lifting equipment provided to avoid manual handling could not be used because of the layout of the workplace. For example, a care assistant working with adults with learning disabilities said: “There is a hoist provided, but because of the layout of the workplace it cannot always be used” and a nursing auxiliary reported, that “in one of the patients’ toilets we cannot get a hoist in, so if a patient falls, we have to lift them”.

## **Other health problems**

More than a third (35%) of respondents said that they had arm or shoulder problems they thought were related to manual handling, 31% had hip or knee problems and 21% had suffered cuts or bruises as a result of incidents involving manual handling.

## **Time off work due to work-related back pain**

More than one in five (21%) of those experiencing back pain at work or at the end of the working day had taken time off work due to work-related back pain in the last 12 months, representing 14% of the whole survey.

A slightly higher proportion of ambulance workers, catering, laundry, portering, cleaning and domestic staff and other manual workers (23%) and nurses and nursing assistants (22%) had taken time off work due to work-related back pain in the last 12 months.

Over forty percent of technicians had taken time off work, but the sample was only very small – 7 out of 16 respondents. One laboratory technician in the science department of a school said that he may have to give up work altogether after he sustained a spinal injury while stocktaking alone. This involved stooping down to check stock kept in very low cupboards and drawers. His job also involved lifting and carrying heavy and awkward loads.

And a quarter of other medical professionals in the survey had taken time off work during the last 12 months, but again the sample was very small, with 5 out of 20 respondents reporting that this was the case.

Of those who had taken time off work due to work-related back pain, nearly a quarter (24%) had taken more than 20 days, 11% had been off between 16 and 20 days, 11% between 11 and 15 days, 14% between 6 and 10 days, and 34% had taken 5 days or less.

A higher proportion of catering, laundry, portering, cleaning and domestic staff (40%), care workers (33%), ambulance workers (33%), and nurses and nursing assistants (21%) who had taken time off work during the last 12 months had taken more than 20 days, although in some cases the samples were very small. For example, 6 out of 29 nurses and nursing assistants, 2 out of 6 ambulance workers, 8 out of 24 care workers and 6 out of 15 catering, laundry, portering, cleaning and domestic staff.

## Training and information

Eighty two percent of those carrying out manual handling work had received training in safe handling or lifting. However, 45% of these had only received training amounting to less than a day, and a further 34% had attended a one day course on safe handling or lifting. Only 4% had been on a course lasting one week.

An occupational therapist in the survey questioned whether a one day course was adequate: “Although I have attended mandatory manual handling courses and these have been of a very high standard, it seems to me that one day is not sufficient time to allow techniques to be learnt through “safe” practice”.

The proportion of respondents receiving training also varied across occupations. Although 97% of ambulance workers, 93% of care workers, and 92% of nurses and nursing assistants reported that they have received training in safe handling or lifting, this was the case with only 32% of nursery nurses and classroom assistants, 59% of catering, laundry, portering, cleaning and domestic staff and 46% of other manual workers.

One refuse worker who worked for a local authority said the job involved loading rubbish into a dustcart above chest height and that “We have wheelie bins and find problems with arms, shoulders and wrists due to the weight of some bins and surfaces to be dragged across, such as gravel”. Yet they had not received any training.

And a cleaner reported that although the job involved operating and lifting buffing machines up steps, picking up paper, mopping and sweeping floors and carrying buckets of water, they had only received one hour of training in safe manual handling and lifting.

Just over 40% of respondents had received training within the last year, 31% within the last 2 years, 18% three to five years ago and 9% had not had any training for more than 5 years. One in five of those in the other manual workers group of respondents reported that they had not received training in safe handling and lifting in the last 5 years.

## Putting training into practice

Many respondents who had received training, reported that it was not possible to carry out safe manual handling procedures in the workplace. One home help commented: “The council’s moving and handling course is good, but it is very hard to put the correct lifting and moving procedures into practice in a working environment. It’s easy to do in the classroom!”

While some said that the workplace layout made it impossible to use safe handling procedures, others felt that cost, particularly in relation to staffing levels was the issue.

An ambulance worker said: “There is not enough rest or stand-down time between each lift. Also, there is very little stand-down time or regular rest periods”.

A support worker whose job involved transporting and carrying children said: “We are actually supposed to have two lifters at a time, but it is more often the case that we are short of staff”.

An occupational therapist commented: “Often carers are struggling to help people with transfers to and from bed, the toilet and chairs, but there is a lack of funding available and resources to be able to provide equipment to make the transfer easier”.

And a school site supervisor who had received advice on correct lifting techniques said that although the advice was followed as far as possible, they sometimes had to deal with large heavy deliveries alone, which caused backache lasting for up to 3 days.

## **Reporting back pain and manual handling problems**

Forty four percent of respondents had not been told how to report manual handling problems and more than half (57%) had not been told to report back pain as well as manual handling accidents by their employer.

Again, this varied across occupational groups. Although three quarters of nurses, 73% of ambulance workers and 68% of care workers had been told how to report manual handling problems to their employer, only 47% of catering, laundry, portering, cleaning and domestic staff and less than a third (30%) of other manual workers had been told how to report problems.

Forty seven percent of nurses and nursing assistants and care workers and 38% of ambulance workers had not been told that they should report back pain as well as manual handling problems to their employer and this increased to 60% of catering, laundry, portering, cleaning and domestic staff, 65% of nursery nurses and classroom assistants, and 67% of other manual workers.

Twenty nine percent of respondents had experienced work-related back pain or other health problems, but had not reported it to their employer. The main reasons given for this was that the problem was not serious enough or it had cleared up (20%), they saw it as an occupational hazard or part of the job (17%), their employer was unlikely to do anything about the problem even if they did report it (11%) and 7% said that they feared that their job would be put at risk or they would be victimised if they did complain.

One home care worker said that despite regularly experiencing work-related back pain, the problem had not been reported to the employer because they were not paid any sick pay. In addition, they worked 12 days before having two days off and commented: “With 12 days on, I look forward to my weekend off just for a rest to be fit for work on Monday and another 12 days on before my weekend off”.

Where problems had been reported to the employer, only 3% said that a record of their complaint had been made. Ten percent said that no action had been taken by the employer as a result of their complaint.