

Manual handling is common in businesses of all types, and so too are the associated injuries that can come from improper or unsafe manual handling actions.

The most common injuries associated with manual handling are musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), including pain or injury to arms, legs and joints. Back and shoulder strains are very common too, as well as repetitive strain injuries (RSI).

Manual handling injuries can occur almost anywhere in the workplace, but heavy manual labour, awkward postures, repetitive movements of arms, legs and back or previous/existing injury can increase the risk. However, many manual handling type injuries can be caused by smaller tasks like packing, typing, cleaning, operating machinery or equipment, or dealing with animals. Because most jobs involve some form of manual handling, most businesses and workers are at some level of risk.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) stats suggest that more than a third of injuries in the workplace are due to manual handling—often because the people doing the handling aren't following the correct procedures.

These injuries can have serious implications not only for the person who has been injured, but of their employer too, who may be faced with a costly claim.

How to reduce instances of manual handling

It's said that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and that's the case with manual handling too. The best way to avoid manual handling injuries is to avoid manual handling – where possible – in the first place.

So before jumping in to the manual handling task, always assess the situation first and ask yourself some of the questions below to determine the best, and safest, course of action:

- What's the weight of the load to be carried?
- Can I move the load safely or do I need any help?
- Can it be broken down to smaller, lighter components or a few different trips?
- Am I required to lift from floor level or above shoulder height?
- Do I need to use lifting equipment, such as a forklift, hoist or conveyor?
- Can I reduce the amount of twisting, stooping and reaching to perform this task?
- Can I minimise the carrying distance, or move obstacles in my way?
- Can I adjust the storage areas to minimise the need to carry out this task in future?

In some cases or in some job roles, avoiding manual handling just isn't an option. So if you need to carry out manual handling tasks, how do you do so safely?

How to perform manual handling safely

So what's the best way to avoid a manual handling injury? Here's ten tips to safe manual handling:

- **1. Think before you lift**
Plan the lift in advance and perform a risk assessment. Could you use a lifting aid, like a hoist or forklift? Where is the object or load going to be placed? Is there a clear path between here and there? How long will the lift last, and is there a suitable mid-way break to reduce exertion? Ask these questions first to ensure the lift and carry is planned accordingly.

- **2. Use a safe lifting position**

A safe lifting position is all about stability and the right distribution of weight. At the start of the lift, your feet should be shoulder-width apart with one leg slightly forward to maintain balance. Make sure your clothing and footwear are suitable for the task too, as you don't want to trip on a loose shoelace or have an item of clothing caught on a door handle, causing you to fall or drop the load.

- **3. Get a good grip**

Hold on tight and make sure the load is secure before attempting to lift it. Where possible, try to hug the object as close to your body as you can for as long as you can, as this can give you more purchase than gripping it tightly with just your hands.

- **4. Keep the load close to your waist**

Keeping the object at waist-level heaviest side of the load next to your body, should help with an even weight distribution.

- **5. Don't lift with your back**

Probably the most common lifting advice: lift with your legs, not your back. Your legs are stronger, so bend your knees and squat down to lift any load from the ground, not your back.

- **6. Avoid twisting**

When lifting or carrying, your shoulders should be kept level and facing the same direction as your hips. If you need to turn, change the direction of your feet instead of twisting and lifting at the same time, which has the potential for greater injury.

- **7. Look up**

Look ahead at where you're going, and not down at your feet or what you're holding. This will help you anticipate any obstacles and make the overall lift safer.

- **8. Move smoothly**

If you can, try to move as smoothly as possible while lifting and carrying. Rocky or jerking movements can make the object harder to control, leading to drops or falls that can increase the risk of an injury.

- **9. Don't lift more than necessary**

There's often a big difference between what people think they can lift, what they can actually lift and what they can safely lift. If in any doubt, seek advice, use a lifting aid or get help.

- **10. Put it down, then adjust**

If precise positioning of the load is necessary, put it down first, then slide it into the desired position. Don't try to put the object down in a very precise position or hold on to it any longer than necessary.