

A guide to back pain

In this article, Amy Noakes looks at back pain, a leading cause of morbidity and sickness absence in healthcare workers

Back pain entails discomfort occurring anywhere in the thoracic and lumbar regions (Gim, 2017). The lifetime prevalence of back pain in health professionals aged 30–49 years is 66.6% (Cheung et al, 2018). It is a leading cause of morbidity and is also associated with psychological factors including stress, sleep deprivation and fatigue (Shariat et al, 2019). It is also a chief reason for sickness absence in healthcare workers (Serra et al, 2019).

Health visitors are at particular risk of back pain due to the physical nature of their role, and this is worsened by high caseloads, long working hours, poor ergonomics, workforce shortages and lack of equipment (Nkhata et al, 2020). However, greater knowledge of safer moving and handling techniques in addition to appropriate equipment can reduce some hazards in relation to back injuries. Employers have the responsibility to ensure staff are trained and appropriately supervised to ensure compliance to ensure safer patient handling (Health and Safety Executive, 2016). It is important that health visitors undertake regular preventive exercises to help reduce the risk of musculoskeletal discomfort.

The Royal College of Nursing (2021) provides an exercise resource aiming to stretch and strengthen the muscles of the lower back, neck and shoulders aiming to reduce the risk of injury.

If back pain occurs, staying as active as possible while gradually returning to normal activities can aid recovery in addition to taking over-the-counter painkillers (Allen, 2021). Positively, 98% of people will recover quickly from back pain, often without treatment. The charity BackCare (2020) suggests the following self-help strategies to speed up recovery:

with another painkiller

- ◆ Use an ice pack to reduce pain and swelling
- ◆ Use a heat pack to relieve joint stiffness or muscle spasms
- ◆ Try some exercises and stretches for back pain.

If the back pain is ongoing, severe or getting worse it is advised to be reviewed by the GP. Health visitors need to prioritise appropriate care of their back to ensure their ongoing health and wellbeing. **JHV**

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- ◆ Avoid bed rest
- ◆ Anti-inflammatory medicine like ibuprofen (this class of drug is not suitable for everyone, so read the patient information leaflet). Paracetamol on its own is not recommended but may be used

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