



A pain in the back

GoodHealth

As a new survey reveals that 75% of GPs want employers to take action to address back pain, **Lisa Salmon** looks at why more than 10million working days a year are lost because of musculoskeletal problems

EVERY day, more than 350,000 members of the UK working population are on sickness leave due to a back problem. As the second most cited reason for absence from work, it's estimated that 80% of people will experience back pain at some time during their lives. In most cases, the trigger will never be determined – but the

reality is that work often contributes to the pain. Certainly, a recent survey of GPs found that 75% thought employers needed to take more action to address the cause of back pain in the workplace. But whether the problem stems from long hours sitting at desks, bad posture while working, heavy lifting or stress, a recent report by the makers of the back support,

Dynaspine, revealed that more than half of sufferers will turn to painkillers to ease the pain. Physiotherapist and biomechanics coach Martin Haines warns that it's important for back-pain sufferers to try to address the reason for their problem rather than trying to mask the pain and hoping it will go away. "Research indicates people are treating the symptoms, not the

cause of back pain," he says. "By making a few simple changes in the workplace and at home, the chances of back pain can be reduced." Such changes might include manual workers being trained to use aids and correct lifting techniques, while office workers are encouraged to set their desks according to the correct guidelines, and take regular breaks.



Haines says: "The back isn't designed to be static – a lack of movement can result in back pain even in a healthy spine.
 "Long hours hunched over a work desk or behind the wheel of a car without the appropriate support and movement can cause musculoskeletal problems."
 Back pain can occur in any region from the base of the skull to the hips and is usually a symptom of stress or damage to the supporting structures in the spine – such as ligaments, muscles, nerves and discs. Symptoms may be as varied as a constant muscle ache or an acute piercing or stabbing pain, or there can be a feeling of something going "click" in the lower part of the spine. Pain may start as a twinge but then get rapidly worse, until every movement is painful and mobility restricted.

When back pain is caused by the irritation of nerve roots, it often radiates into the thigh and may be accompanied by other symptoms such as weakness, tingling and numbness.

Pain is not usually caused by an underlying condition and, in most cases, nothing is permanently damaged. These cases are called simple or non-specific back pain, and the majority (90%) of sufferers recover completely within six weeks.

There's no doubt that, in many cases, working conditions aren't helping employees with bad backs.

Sash Newman, chief executive of the charity for healthier backs, BackCare, says: "Back pain costs more in terms of time off and lost production than almost any other health problem in the workplace. "That's why workers and

employers should take the problem of back pain seriously."

To help both employees and employers affected by back pain, BackCare has produced the healthcare information pack, Work it Out. It includes the latest advice on correct procedures for sitting, typing, lifting and moving heavy objects, plus information on the causes of back pain, the law in the workplace, and reducing the risks.

The charity is trying to persuade employers to recognise the problems surrounding back pain so they can help sufferers and ensure that they remain productive members of the workforce. It has also drawn up a checklist of measures which human-resources departments can use to help prevent back pain. It includes organising educational events to show workers how to look after their backs, training on correct manual-handling and lifting techniques, and promotion of exercise through discounted fitness-club memberships.

In addition, the charity wants employers to be more understanding of people suffering back pain by altering their work hours or shift patterns.

"Often, any changes made are short-lived as most people will recover relatively quickly from a back-pain episode, or they will learn to manage it so it doesn't interfere with their work," stresses Newman. In many cases, staying active and continuing with usual activities – as much as possible – will actually encourage healing. Simple treatment options include taking painkillers or using hot or cold compression packs. And, in most cases, especially when

pain is severe and persistent, it's important to seek medical advice.

Treatment will usually depend on the underlying cause of the condition, and therapies such as physiotherapy, osteopathy and chiropractic, as well as massage and pain clinics, are options.

REAL-LIFE PAIN

Mike Johnson, 49, has suffered with crippling back pain since his early-20s, when he drove all over the country for his job as a sales rep.

"It got so severe that I was unable to sit at a desk or drive for longer than two hours, and had to take time off work on numerous occasions," he remembers.

He now works as a sales and marketing director and uses a back support to help ease his pain.

"It's always underlying, but there are times when it gets worse – notably when I'm sitting in front of a computer for long periods of time.

"In all the years that I've had this bad back, I've tried everything, often relying on painkillers to get through the week.

"But that's only ever taken the edge off the pain."

BACK PAIN – FAST FACTS

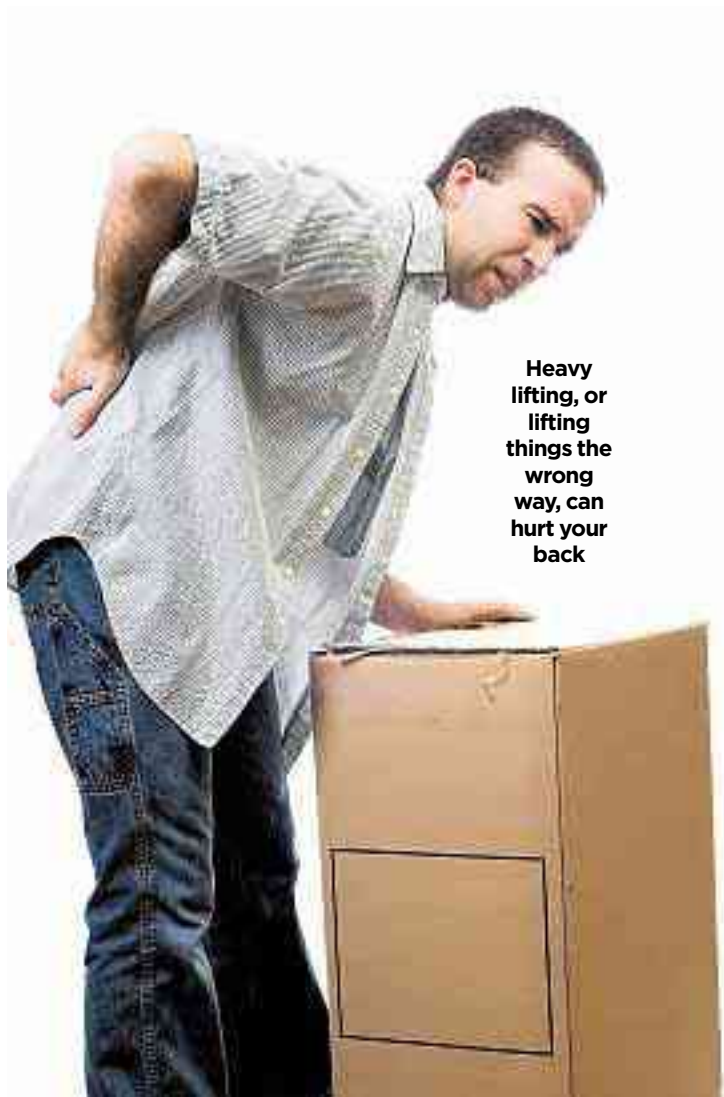
- Back pain accounts for 4.1million lost working days in the UK and costs the economy an estimated £5billion through sick pay, lost revenue, healthcare and benefits.

- A new survey of 8,000 British people by the makers of the back support, Dynaspine, found that 62% blamed long hours sitting at desks for causing back pain at work; 42% cited bad posture while working; 26% said that heavy lifting was to blame, and 19%

said stress was the main factor.

● Back pain is more likely to develop if you stand, sit or bend down for long periods; lift, carry, push or pull loads that are too heavy; lift in the wrong way; have a fall; are stressed, and/or overweight.

■ **The BackCare information pack, Work it Out, which costs £20, can be ordered from www.backcare.org.uk. The BackCare helpline is on 0845 130 2704.**







Neck pain is a common complaint among those who spend a lot of time in a fixed position, in front of a computer, for example



