

Manual Handling

Summary

1. Manual Material Handling (MMH) is a term used to describe the tasks that require workers' hands to carry out actions such as lifting, rolling, pulling, emptying and moving goods or materials.
2. Carrying out MMH tasks incorrectly can have an economic impact on an organization through workdays lost to sickness, decreased productivity and compensation claims.
3. Physical work can involve repetitive movements and awkward postures (bending and twisting) that place strain on anatomical components of the human body, which can give rise to musculoskeletal disorders (MSD).
4. Of the non-fatal injuries and illnesses requiring days away from work, MSDs accounted for 20% of those in 2011.
5. Employers can eliminate risks by providing equipment to replace the need for MMH or by changing an employee's workstation.

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Overview

A number of industries (eg. construction, agriculture, manufacturing and warehousing) require workers to undertake tasks involving lifting, rolling, pulling, emptying and moving goods or materials on a regular basis. Although many of these tasks are handled with machinery (see our Pathfinder document titled [Forklift Truck Safety](#)), certain tasks still require human intervention. Manual Material Handling (MMH) is a term used to describe the tasks that require workers' hands or fingers to carry out the actions such as those described above. Workers face a number of physical hazards (eg. awkward postures, sprains and strains and back pain) when carrying out MMH tasks incorrectly, which in turn can have an economic impact on an organization through workdays lost to sickness, decreased productivity and compensation claims.

Physical work often results in physical conditions

Physical work often involves repetitive movements and awkward postures (such as bending, overreaching, raised arms and twisting) that place pressure and strain on anatomical structures within the human body such as muscles, tendons, connective tissues, nerves and blood vessels. Damage to these components can cause a range of conditions like musculoskeletal disorders (MSD). The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that MSDs accounted for 30% of the non-fatal injuries and illnesses requiring days away from work in 2006.

MSD conditions can occur as a result of gradual exposure to the same task over a period of time or through a single damaging event. Furthermore, the age, stature and physical health of an employee will affect their response to a particular task. A very common complaint from employees undertaking physical work is back pain. In fact, NIOSH reports that 600,000 employees each year experience back disorders.

Preventative measures for reducing MMH hazards

An employer can undertake a risk assessment in the workplace to determine the MMH hazards that workers are exposed to. Once an assessment has taken place and risks identified, steps to prevent exposure can be facilitated. Steps to eliminate the risk include provision of machinery or equipment to replace the need for MMH or by changing an employee's workstation. Examples include using lifts or hoists for heavy objects or making sure that materials are not stored on the floor but are raised to a manageable height for workers. Training is vital to ensure employees know how to undertake physical tasks correctly. However, it is essential that evaluation exercises be carried out to assess training effectiveness.