

Legal requirements

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Employers must protect staff from the risk of injury and also protect staff who have an existing musculoskeletal disorder from hazardous manual handling in the workplace. Manual handling includes moving or supporting a load by hand or bodily force. It includes lifting, putting down, pushing, pulling, carrying or moving loads. A load can be an object or a person.

The Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992 and Manual Handling Operations Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1992 place a duty on all employers to follow the following hierarchy of measures:

Avoid hazardous manual handling operations 'so far as is reasonably practicable', by redesigning the task to avoid moving the load or by automating or mechanising the process.

Make a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risk of injury from any hazardous manual handling operations that cannot be avoided.

Reduce the risk of injury from those operations 'so far as is reasonably practicable'. Where possible, provide mechanical assistance, for example a sack trolley or hoist. Where this is not reasonably practicable, explore changes to the task, the load and the working environment.

Specific guidance on the regulations is available on the HSE and HSE NI websites, together with full risk assessment checklists, manual handling toolkit and further information on preventing musculoskeletal disorders.

Employers should ensure that in addition to assessing and managing risks resulting from manual handling tasks and activities, individual risk assessments of staff are undertaken to identify whether specific adjustments suited to the individual are required. These may include reasonable adjustments, tailored adjustments or phased returns.

Reasonable adjustments

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Employers must make reasonable adjustments to ensure workers with disabilities and physical or mental health conditions are not substantially disadvantaged when doing their jobs. This applies to all workers, including trainees, apprentices, contract workers and business partners. There's more detail about employers' obligations and how to meet them on the Equality and Human Rights Commission website.

In addition to regulatory compliance, employers must consider the moral obligation they have to protect staff, ensure they do not suffer injury or ill health at work, and support them if they have musculoskeletal problems to enable them to stay in work.