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# BACK IN WORK THE STAFF GUIDE

Part two of the  
*Back in work* back pack

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UPDATED OCTOBER 2014

**THE NHS STAFF COUNCIL**  
WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

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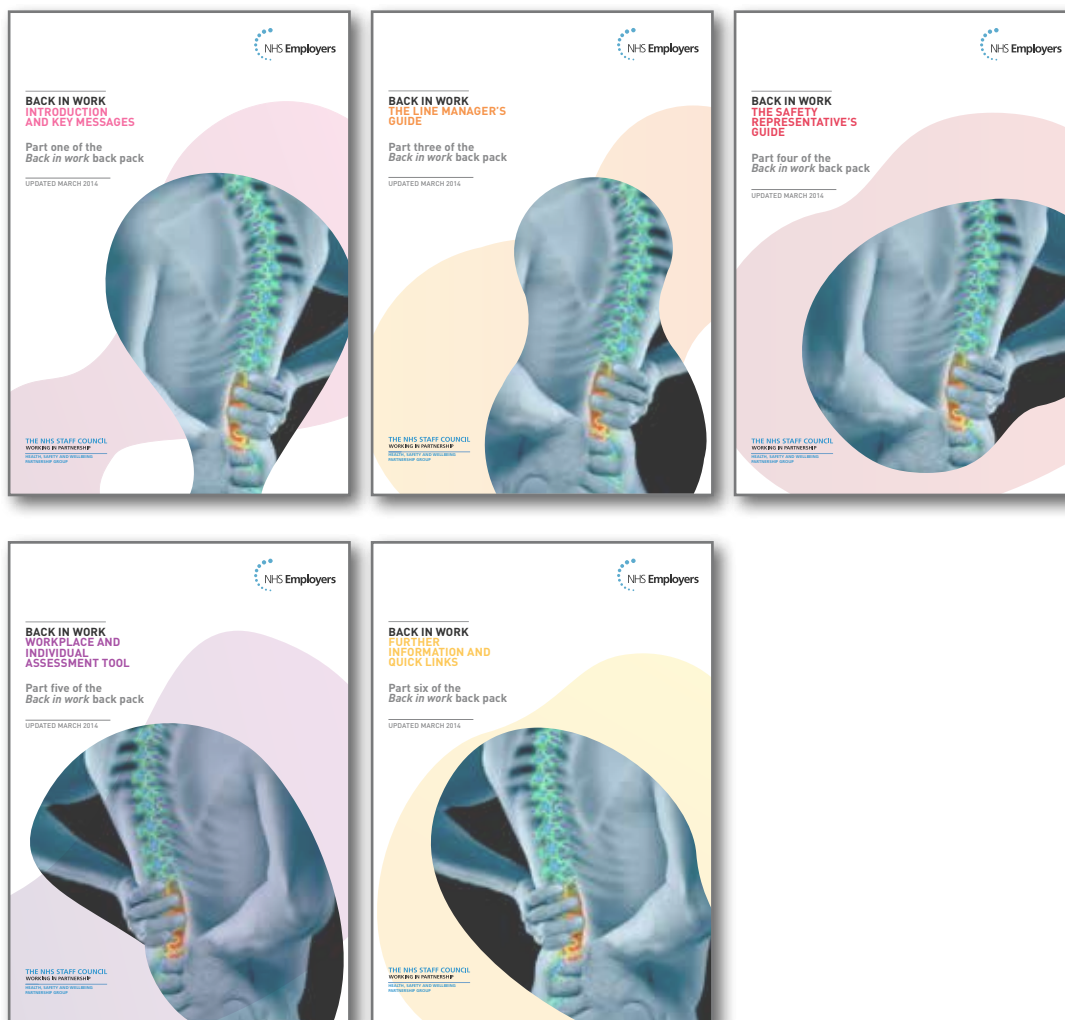
HEALTH, SAFETY AND WELLBEING  
PARTNERSHIP GROUP



## Contents

Staff guide – looking after yourself and your responsibilities	3
Risk assessments	3
Fit to work	3
Helping yourself	4
Change4Life	5
Fit for Work Service	5

Part two (of six) of the *Back in work* back pack.



## Staff guide – looking after yourself and your responsibilities

Your employer has certain responsibilities and duties related to your welfare and health and safety, which are laid out in legislation such as the **Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974** and the **Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992** (as amended) (MHOR). The **Health and Safety Executive** (HSE) offers comprehensive advice and guidance on current health and safety legislation and how it applies in the workplace.

You also have duties of care and responsibilities whilst at work. This section outlines the basic guidelines for you and where to find out more information.

The MHOR requires your employer to:

- **avoid** the need for hazardous manual handling, so far as is reasonably practicable
- **assess** the risk of injury from any hazardous manual handling that can't be avoided
- **reduce** the risk of injury from hazardous manual handling, so far as is reasonably practicable.

It requires employees to:

- **follow** appropriate systems of work laid down for their safety
- **make proper use** of equipment provided for their safety
- **cooperate** with their employer on health and safety matters
- **inform** the employer if they identify hazardous handling activities
- **take care** to ensure that their activities do not put others at risk.

### Risk assessments

Health and safety legislation imposes a duty on employers to carry out risk assessments to ensure employees are kept safe. Employees are also responsible for recognising and reporting risks and for not placing themselves in unsafe situations.

If you are aware that an activity has become unsafe due to a new set of circumstances or damage to equipment, you should inform your employer or your health and safety representative. You understand the activities your job entails probably better than anyone else, particularly if you have been in the same job for a number of years. If you have identified a problem or issue which if not addressed may cause injury to you or someone else, you should discuss this with either your employer or your health and safety representative at the earliest opportunity.

### Fit to work

Recent government campaigns have focused on fitness to work and being supported to remain in work wherever possible. The *Back in work* back pack complements these initiatives and aims to provide employees and employers with the information they need to facilitate a speedy return to work of those affected by a musculoskeletal disorder (MSD).

Keeping fit and eating correctly are both key components in helping staff fight infection and injury. Many NHS organisations offer their staff opportunities to stay or get fit through exercise classes, gyms and discount offers for schemes such as cycle to work and so on. Access to these will depend on your trust and the funding available; usually these types of schemes are organised by human resources, occupational health, improving working lives or health work and wellbeing officers. General fitness is not always a guarantee against injury – a simple lifting exercise wrongly executed, or just bad luck, can result in an employee sustaining an MSD and finding themselves signed off work.

“Keeping fit and eating correctly are both key components in helping staff fight infection and injury”

“Trying to reduce the pain by avoiding movement slows recovery and can lead to long-term pain”

Research has shown that without careful management what could be a short spell of sickness absence can turn into long-term sickness and result in further medical conditions. For those with an MSD, a ‘fast track’ referral to physiotherapy or occupational health, and if necessary a further referral to another health department, could mean an early return to work. Employees returning to work may need to do lighter duties until they have made a full recovery. Research has shown the benefits of staying in work or making an early return to both the employee and the employer. If your organisation does not offer these options, it may be worthwhile discussing your situation directly with your human resources and occupational health departments as well as your line manager and staff representative.

## Helping yourself

In the past, the accepted response to back pain and some types of MSDs was bed rest or keeping the affected part immobile. Evidence now shows that it is much better to keep as ‘normally active’ as possible. Trying to reduce the pain by avoiding movement slows recovery and can lead to long-term pain. Manipulation can sometimes help to ease the pain and aid recovery. More recently, acupuncture has proved to be beneficial in tackling back pain. The charity **BackCare** has some advice on its website and a helpline (0845 130 2704) to help individuals with the self management of back pain.

There will be instances where certain types of injury will require medical treatment. If you are in any doubt, you should contact your occupational health unit or your GP.

Keeping up to date with the latest training techniques for manual handling and taking the opportunity to participate in refresher training courses is always good practice. There is also a requirement on your manager to release you for any training related to moving and manual handling, and to maintain any equipment in safe working order. Encouraging patients to help themselves wherever possible and whenever it is safe for them to do so is better for them, in terms of encouraging their mobility, and you, in terms of lessening the risk of injury.

Your individual capability to safely perform manual handling tasks is important. If you cannot perform manoeuvres using the correct postures and movements because, for example, you have an underlying condition, an injury, are pregnant, or are overweight, this can put you, your colleagues and the patient at risk of injury.

A mismatch between your physical capability and the demands of the job can lead to increased sickness absence, early ill health retirement and infirmity, if not resolved.

We all have a responsibility to manage our own health and physical fitness, including weight.<sup>1</sup> The cross-government strategy, **Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives**, estimates that by 2050, 60 per cent of the UK population will be obese. Maintaining a healthy weight will help you to manage back pain and other MSDs, carry out manual handling tasks safely, and make an early recovery from injury.

Improving your health and fitness<sup>2</sup> can be done in a variety of ways, from simply finding the time to take a 30 minute brisk walk each day to receiving counselling and support on a troubling personal issue. Your weight and fitness plan should be as individual as yourself; take advantage of schemes on offer from your employer, support from occupational health, colleagues, your line manager, GP, friends and family. More information can be obtained from the **National Obesity Forum**.

It is important to stress that while you should be supported to lose weight and get fit by your employer if that is what you **can** and **want** to do, no one should be bullied or harassed because of a weight issue.

<sup>1</sup> Workplace implications of obesity:

[www.radcliffe-oxford.com/books/samplechapter/0584/Williams%20chapt%2004-109a6e80rdz.pdf](http://www.radcliffe-oxford.com/books/samplechapter/0584/Williams%20chapt%2004-109a6e80rdz.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> If you are overweight due to a medical condition you should seek medical advice before starting any fitness or diet regime.



“By 2050, 60 per cent of the UK population will be obese”

## Change4Life

**Change4Life** is a government initiative that aims to prevent people from becoming overweight by encouraging them to eat better and move more. The campaign looks at the subject of weight and physical activity and urges people to make changes to their diets and levels of activity.

## Fit for Work Service

In March 2010, 11 pilot Fit for Work Services (FFWS) were established to provide personalised, case-managed support for workers in the early stages of sickness absence or ill-health in order to expedite return to work and support job retention.

Pilots were formed by partnerships of health, employment and local community organisations. From April 2011, seven of the pilots were funded for up to a further two years. The pilots were robustly evaluated in a report published in February 2012: **Evaluation of the Fit for Work Service pilots: first year report**.



## NHS Employers

The NHS Employers organisation is the voice of employers in the NHS, supporting them to put patients first. Our vision is to be the authoritative voice of workforce leaders, experts in HR, negotiating fairly to get the best deal for patients.

We help employers make sense of current and emerging healthcare issues to ensure that their voice is front and centre of health policy and practice. We keep them up to date with the latest workforce thinking and expert opinion, providing practical advice and information, and generating opportunities to network and share knowledge and best practice.

We work with employers in the NHS to reflect their views and act on their behalf in four priority areas:

- pay and negotiations
- recruitment and planning the workforce
- healthy and productive workplaces
- employment policy and practice.

The NHS Employers organisation is part of the NHS Confederation.

## Contact us

For more information on how to get involved in our work, email [Healthworkandwellbeing@nhsemployers.org](mailto:Healthworkandwellbeing@nhsemployers.org)  
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 [NHS Employers](https://www.linkedin.com/company/nhs-employers)

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