Nurses have the highest rates of work-related back pain. Educational interventions can help prevent injury and promote understanding of safe patient handling.

Improving training and education in patient handling

In this article...

- Why safe patient handling is important to prevent injury
- The principles of safe patient handling
- Birmingham City University’s approach to patient handling education

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Injuries associated with patient handling have been a problem in healthcare for decades, particularly for nurses, who have the highest rates of work-related back pain among health professionals (Edlich et al, 2004). Patient handling is a skilled activity combining theoretical knowledge with practical experience, and poor technique can lead to herniated discs and other musculoskeletal injuries. However, efforts to reduce injuries associated with patient handling are often based on tradition and personal experience rather than sound educational theory. Weaknesses have been identified in the educational approaches to improving patient handling practices (Wanless and Page, 2009), and there is a growing body of evidence supporting newer interventions for reducing musculoskeletal injuries to healthcare workers (Wanless and Page, 2009).

This article discusses the methods for educational interventions in patient handling at Birmingham City University, and describes how simulation exercises can help prevent injury and promote an understanding of the principles associated with patient handling tasks.

Training and education

Despite strong evidence on its importance, the most commonly used strategy of teaching moving and handling — showing healthcare workers prescriptive techniques required to handle patients — has proved to be ineffective. Healthcare education for safe patient handling is shared between the university and clinical practice. Universities have a legal duty to prepare students for patient handling activities in practice.

1. Patient handling is a skilled activity combining theoretical knowledge with practical experience. Poor technique can cause musculoskeletal injuries.
2. Healthcare education for safe patient handling is shared between university and clinical practice.
3. Safe patient handling starts with a personal risk assessment. Every time you assist or transfer a patient you are at risk of injury so a handling procedure should only be carried out if it is really necessary.
4. Poor posture can be corrected by maintaining a neutral spine, using your legs, never twisting your back and keeping the load close.
5. Promoting good posture and positioning in nurse education will only be beneficial if patient handling is taken seriously in clinical settings.