Manual Handling Risk Assessment: A Practical Guide for Employers

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Manual handling injuries, which include back strains, shoulder problems and repetitive strain conditions, remain one of the most common causes of workplace ill health in the UK. They occur in almost every sector, from warehouses and care settings to offices and construction sites, and they are largely preventable with the right assessment, controls and training.

This guide explains what the law requires, what a proper manual handling risk assessment looks like, who is responsible for it, and how often it needs to be reviewed.

What Counts as Manual Handling?

Manual handling means any transporting or supporting of a load by bodily force. That includes lifting, lowering, pushing, pulling, carrying or moving an object, and the load does not have to be a box or a crate. It can be a person, an animal, or anything else that places a physical demand on the handler.

Because the definition is so broad, manual handling risks exist in almost every workplace. A care worker repositioning a resident, a warehouse operative stacking pallets and an office worker moving furniture are all doing manual handling, and the same regulations cover all three.

What the Law Requires

The Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992 (as amended) set out a clear hierarchy of duties for employers. You must:

- Avoid hazardous manual handling operations so far as is reasonably practicable, for example by redesigning a task or introducing mechanical handling
- Assess any hazardous manual handling that cannot reasonably be avoided
- Reduce the risk of injury from that handling so far as is reasonably practicable
- Review assessments when circumstances change, such as a new load, a new layout, or a change in the workforce

These duties sit alongside the requirement under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 to carry out a suitable and sufficient risk assessment of significant workplace hazards, and manual handling is often one of them. The general duty under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 to protect the health, safety and welfare of employees underpins all of this.

Assessing the Risk: The TILE Approach

Official guidance uses the TILE framework (task, individual, load and environment) to structure an assessment.

Task

Does the task involve twisting, stooping, reaching upward, large vertical movement, long carrying distances, repetitive handling, or sudden or strenuous pushing and pulling? Tasks that combine several of these factors carry a much higher risk than a single, controlled lift.

Individual

Does the task demand unusual strength or height, and could it pose a particular risk to someone who is pregnant, has a health condition, or lacks the training or experience to handle the load safely? A generic assessment that ignores individual capability will miss real risks.

Load

Is the load heavy, bulky, awkward to grip, unstable, sharp, hot or cold? A lighter load that is hard to hold securely can be more dangerous than a heavier one that is well balanced.

Environment

Are there space constraints, uneven or slippery floors, changes in level, poor lighting or extremes of temperature? The environment often turns a manageable task into a hazardous one.

Reducing the Risk: The Hierarchy of Control

Once hazardous handling has been identified, work through a hierarchy of control rather than jumping straight to training.

- **Avoid:** can the handling be eliminated entirely, for example by changing a delivery method or using a different packaging size?
- **Mechanise:** can handling aids such as trolleys, hoists, vacuum lifters or conveyors remove or reduce the physical effort involved?
- **Redesign:** can the task, the load, or the workstation be changed to reduce twisting, stooping or carrying distance?
- **Train:** once the risk has been reduced as far as reasonably practicable, ensure the people doing the task understand safe technique and correct use of any aids provided

A common mistake is treating training as the primary control. Training is valuable, but it cannot compensate for an unsafe task, an unsuitable load or a poor environment. It works best once the task has been improved as far as reasonably practicable, and it should help employees understand why certain movements are risky, recognise hazardous tasks before they start, and use any aids properly. It also gives staff the confidence to flag a task that looks unsafe rather than attempting it anyway.

Integral Safety is an IOSH approved training provider and runs a Manual Handling Awareness course that helps participants apply safe technique to their own work activities.

What a Compliant Arrangement Looks Like in Practice

A manual handling risk assessment should not be a one-off form filled in and filed away. In a compliant arrangement, assessments are specific to the actual tasks in your workplace, not generic templates copied from elsewhere. They identify who carries out each task, what the load actually weighs and how it behaves, and which controls are already in place and which are still needed.

Responsibility for the assessment usually sits with the employer, but it is often delegated to a line manager, supervisor or nominated competent person who understands the task well enough to assess it properly. That person needs enough knowledge of manual handling risk factors to recognise a genuine hazard, which is why many employers bring in external support through a competent person service or ongoing consultancy, particularly where handling risks are complex or in-house expertise is limited.

Assessments should be reviewed whenever something changes, such as a new type of load, a different layout, new starters, or an injury or near miss that suggests the controls are not working. Even where nothing obvious has changed, it is good practice to revisit them periodically, for example annually, to check the controls are still followed and still adequate. Keep records of assessments, the controls put in place and any training delivered, and make sure they can be produced if needed.

Sector Considerations

Manual handling risk looks different in each sector. In warehousing and logistics, repetitive picking, varying load weights and time pressure drive the risk, and mechanical aids such as pallet trucks and conveyors often make the biggest difference. In care homes, handling frequently involves moving people rather than objects, which brings extra considerations around hoists, slings and individual care plans, and where a resident has specific health needs it is worth involving an occupational health provider. Manufacturing and construction often combine heavy, awkward loads with uneven ground or confined spaces, so the environment element of TILE matters particularly.

Because the right controls vary so much by sector and task, a generic policy rarely covers every risk. A site-specific review, carried out through an audit and inspection or a wider consultancy review, will usually find handling risks that a standard checklist misses.

Getting Help

If you are not confident that your manual handling assessments are specific, current and properly controlled, have them reviewed by someone independent. Integral Safety, based in Coalville and working across the East Midlands, can help you assess manual handling risks, put sensible controls in place, and book your staff onto our Manual Handling Awareness course. Get in touch to talk through your arrangements.

Talk to Integral Safety Ltd

We are health and safety consultants based in Coalville, Leicestershire, working with businesses across the East Midlands. If anything in this guide applies to your workplace, we can help.

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This guide is general information about UK health and safety law and practice, correct as at 11 November 2026. It is not advice on your particular circumstances. The latest version is at https://integralsafetyltd.co.uk/blog/manual-handling-reducing-workplace-injuries.