MOVING HEAVY LOADS TOPS RE-INJURY RISK

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A study has found that frequent carrying or moving of heavy loads at work is associated with a significant risk of re-injury. Other factors that raised the risk of work-related subsequent injury included having an inadequate household income, and being in the 50 to 64 year old age bracket.

The study, '*Predictors of subsequent injury at work: findings from a prospective cohort of injured workers in New Zealand*'[1], was funded by New Zealand's Health Research Council. It looked at data from an earlier project – the Prospective Outcomes of Injury Study (POIS) – combined with administrative data from the Accident Compensation Corporation (New Zealand's no-fault universal injury insurer) and hospital discharge data.

Participants in the research were workers from the POIS study who had a previous work-related injury, and the aim was to investigate factors likely to increase the risk of further workplace injuries. Apart from workers' age, the adequacy of their household income and whether their jobs involved a lot of handling of heavy loads, the researchers also analysed the effect of the workers' general pre-injury health, and sociodemographic factors (such as sex, education, and migration background), but these appeared to be less relevant to the risk of re-injury.

More than one third of the participants (37 per cent) had at least one subsequent work-related injury within two years of the first injury. A comparable Australian study found a similar proportion of workers with compensable injuries made a second claim for compensation within five years of their earlier injury.

In the present study, jobs that involved carrying or moving heavy loads more than half the time showed a relative risk of 1.42, which means that they were 1.42 times more likely to be re-injured at work, compared with people whose jobs never involved such tasks.

Workers with a household income defined as 'inadequate' had a relative risk of 1.33, compared with workers whose household income was considered to be adequate; and those aged 50–64 had a relative re-injury risk of 1.25, compared with those in the 30–49 years age bracket.

Though the increased levels of risk were not great, the study indicated that after an initial work injury, subsequent work-related injuries do occur quite often, and the factors that make re-injury more likely offer a useful focus for both injury prevention efforts and rehabilitation.

For example, following an initial injury, modifying the job or task or the working method may help to protect against further injuries, especially for people lifting and moving heavy or awkward loads. While this should be a standard part of risk management, the study reinforces the importance of post-injury risk assessments with tasks involved in an initial injury.

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Considering the ageing workforce, supporting older workers returning to work after an injury is a high priority, as well as looking into specific strategies to make re-injury less likely.

It has long been recognised that an initial musculoskeletal injury and older age can make a person more vulnerable to re-injury, depending on the type of tasks a worker is engaged in. But few previous studies have looked at the influence of other factors such as the perceived adequacy of household income.

The researchers suggested that this may influence the outcome because financial insecurity may prompt workers to return to their pre-injury duties before they have recovered sufficiently to safely undertake those duties. Workers who feel they cannot afford recommended treatments or rehabilitation processes could be similarly vulnerable.

The present study on factors predicting workplace re-injury highlights the importance of workplace interventions following a work injury. The frequency of re-injury should be taken into account when devising risk management strategies for hazardous manual tasks and also when formulating return to work programs, particularly in relation to older workers and those engaged in a considerable amount of heavy labour and manual handling.

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1 Harcombe, Helen et al. BMJ Journals: Occupational & Environmental Medicine, 2020, *Predictors of subsequent injury at work: findings from a prospective cohort of injured workers in New Zealand.* https://oem.bmj.com/content/early/2020/08/13/oemed-2020-106597