Back pain and health visitors

Back pain entails discomfort occurring anywhere in the thoracic and lumbar regions (Gim 2017). The lifetime prevalence of back pain within health professionals between 30 to 49 years is 66.6% (Cheung et al 2018). This is a leading cause of morbidity and is also associated with psychological factors including stress, sleep deprivation and fatigue (Shariat et al 2019). This is a chief reason for sickness absence in healthcare workers (Serra et al 2019).

Health visitors are at particular risk of back pain due to the physical nature of their role but this is capitulated by high caseloads, long working hours, poor ergonomics, workforce shortages and lack of equipment (Nkhata et al 2020). However greater knowledge of safer moving and handling techniques in addition to appropriate equipment can reduced some hazards in relation to back injuries.

Employers have the responsibility to ensure staff are trained and appropriately supervised to maintain compliance, aiming to ensure safer patient handling (Health and Safety Executive 2016).

It is important that health visitors undertake regular preventative exercises. The Royal College of Nursing (2021) provide an exercise resource aiming to stretch and strengthen the muscles of the lower back, neck and shoulders aiming to reduce the risk of injury.

If back pain occurs, staying as active as possible whilst gradually returning to normal activities can aid recovery in addition to taking over-the-counter painkillers (Allen 2021). Positively, 98% of people will recover quickly from back pain, often without treatment (Chartered society of physiotherapy 2017). The Charity BackCare (2020) suggest the following self-help strategies to ‘speed-up’ recovery:

* Avoid bed-rest
* Anti-inflammatory medicine like ibuprofen (this class of drug is not suitable for everyone so read the patient information leaflet) – paracetamol on its own is not recommended but may be used with another painkiller
* use an ice pack to reduce pain and swelling
* use a heat pack to relieve joint stiffness or muscle spasms
* Exercises and stretches for back pain

If the backpain is ongoing, severe or getting worse it is advised to be reviewed by the GP (NHS 2022).

Overall Health visitors need to prioritise appropriate care of their back to ensure their ongoing health and wellbeing.

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