

FACTSHEET

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Looking after your back: for parents and carers

Children with a physical disability may need physical assistance from parents and carers for their daily care. In providing this care, parents and carers are at risk of a back injury when lifting or transferring their child.

The physical demands on parents and carers can change over time. The amount of help children need changes over time. It may change suddenly if there is a change in a child's life such as having surgery. Often however, the physical demands change slowly, as children grow or circumstances change due to a change in their medical condition.

It is important to look after your back by minimising the risks of injury. A back injury can be painful and debilitating, and can make it very difficult to care for your child.

Risk factors

- Is your child over 16kg?
- Do you lift your child often?
- Do you bend or twist when lifting?
- Do you sometimes lift in a restricted space?
- Is your child awkward to lift?
- Do you lift your child from a low height or from surfaces above waist height?
- Is it hard to get help to lift when you need it?
- Do you have any back, leg or arm pain? Or have you experienced them in the past?

If you answered **YES** to any of these questions, you are at **risk** of a back injury.

Things to think about

- **Independence and involvement in transfers.**
When it is safe to do so, children should be encouraged to do as much as possible to help you with their daily care (eg: when transferring from the wheelchair to the bed). Your physiotherapist or occupational therapist can advise you on the best methods for transfers.
- **Stand back and look at the situation.**
Review transfer techniques and equipment with your therapists as your child grows and develops.
- **Quality of life.**
Remember that quality of life is important for the whole family. Save your energy for enjoyable family activities by avoiding unnecessary or risky tasks. Use equipment or get help.
- **Planning.**
Think about your child's future needs. This can be a positive way of planning for their future so their care is sustainable and so they can be as independent as possible.

Tips and ideas for back care

If you need to lift:

- Plan your lift or transfer.
- Make sure there are no objects which will get in the way of you lifting and carrying.
- Lift with your child's weight close to your body.
- Use your legs to do the work; do not bend your back.

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- Tighten your stomach muscles without holding your breath. This gives your back extra support during the activity.
 - Ask for help if your child is too heavy or awkward to lift.
 - Avoid lifting your child from the floor.
 - Alternative methods may be possible – for example, lying down in the stroller or wheelchair for clothing changes and use of toileting aids.

Manual handling equipment and changing the environment can help.

Some examples include:

- Hoists, to move your child from the bed to chair/toilet etc.
- Electric high / low beds – to get to the best height for transfers and work heights for carers.
- Van modifications to allow wheelchair transport.
- Mobile shower/toilet chairs.
- Slide sheets, for moving your child up the bed or rolling.
- Pivot devices or slide boards.
- Home or school modifications to allow use of equipment.
- Clothing modifications.

Remember to look after yourself:

- You can do something now and in the future to stop an injury occurring.
- Your child's therapist can help you to find the right solutions.
- Consider going to a manual handling course or asking your child's therapy team for specific manual handling advice.
- Develop a regular exercise routine, even just a 20 minute walk every few days, will keep your muscles in good condition and make caring for your child safer and easier.
- Seek treatment and advice at the first sign of back pain.