

Are Irish therapists at increased risk of low back pain? - Comparison with national working population

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) is a broad term used to describe a number of inflammatory and degenerative conditions of the muscles, tendons, ligaments, joints, nerves and supporting blood vessels. They affect the upper limbs, lower limbs and the back. Although not only caused by work, MSDs can be caused or aggravated by many work factors. These are termed work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WRMSDs). Work-related low back pain (LBP) has been shown to account for one-third of all disability arising from work risk factors.

Previous international research, on the prevention and/or reduction of LBP, in health care workers has focused predominantly on nurses, nursing assistants and nursing students. Therapists in health care, including physiotherapists, physical therapists and athletic therapists with 'hand-intensive occupations', have been proposed to be a high-risk occupational group for the development of LBP due to the physical work they engage in within their day to day work. For example, they are involved in highly demanding work which includes physically handling and repositioning clients and staying in awkward positions during treatments. Whilst internationally the terms *physiotherapist* and *physical therapists* are used interchangeably, in Ireland there is a distinct difference in the use of these terms and they have been historically organised as two separate professions. Physiotherapists have been described as broad based health care professionals that not only addresses musculoskeletal care of the physically active but also deal with a number of diverse clinical fields. In contrast, Physical Therapists in Ireland are certified, first contact practitioners and specialise in manual techniques to assess and treat pain and discomfort in the soft tissues. Finally, Athletic Therapists specialise in musculoskeletal injuries related to physical activity. Within the current research, no studies have been identified that provide a comparison between prevalence rate of LBP for therapists and the national working population. The investigation is essential to determine whether therapists are a high-risk occupational group for the development of LBP, as proposed.

In a study conducted by researchers from University College Cork, Department of Epidemiology & Public Health and funded by the Institution of Occupational Safety & Health (IOSH), 49% of therapists reported that they had experienced LBP over a 12 month period. This prevalence compared well to worldwide rates for therapists, specifically European prevalence rates, which ranged from 37% in a study conducted in the United Kingdom to 30 percent in a Swedish study. The national working population in Ireland reported LBP prevalence of 16% over a 12 month period. When comparing the LBP prevalence rates for the different groups, it was clear that therapists suffered from a higher prevalence of LBP compared to the national working population, with therapists nearly five times more likely to suffer from LBP than the national working population, which was true for all age groups and both male and female therapists.

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