Laundry Workers Meeting Kit

What’s At Stake

Laundry workers wash, dry, steam, iron, dye, and chemically treat fabrics in commercial laundry services, hospitals, detention facilities, hotels, and other settings. Laundry can be heavy, treated with chemicals, and the work environment can be hot and humid.

THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF LAUNDRY WORK

- Safety begins when you first contact dirty linens. Linens may be contaminated with bodily fluids, body tissues, and even needles. Get the pathogens. Wear gloves and practice good hand washing.
- Chemical detergents, bleaches, fabric softeners, and starches clean laundry. Some laundry is treated with stain removal solutions, dyes, fire retardants, and waterproofing. Contact with concentrated chemicals can cause skin sensitivities.
- Hot water, hot irons, and steam presses can make a hot and humid environment.
- Moving machinery like washers that agitate and spin laundry, dryers that spin and tumble laundry, robotic arms and conveyors that move items can cause severe injuries if you come into contact with them.
- Laundry can be heavy. When you manually move laundry, break down the loads into smaller batches to avoid ergonomic strains.
- When you finish, fold, press, and hang items, work at a level that is comfortable to use and close to your body. Adjustable tables ensure that you don’t have to reach up or bend over to do your work.

What’s the Danger

REDUCE THE RISK FACTORS FOR REPETITIVE MOTION INJURIES (RMI)

Continual twisting and reaching while working with extended arms can contribute to the development of repetitive motion injuries. However, the risk for such injuries while folding towels is somewhat lower than for the ” ironing and folding” of bedsheets and pillowcases. Some control over the pace of work and some flexibility in the working postures are responsible for the reduced risk.

Sorting and washing. In the laundry processing, the “sorting and washing” operations are typically manual material handling tasks. These tasks pose the risk for low back pain.

Manual material handling cannot be fully eliminated but it is possible to reduce it by reorganizing the flow of work. For example, instead of sorting towels and linen before loading them into the bins, it would be preferable to load the laundry in the bins directly from the pile under the chute. This would eliminate handling the same laundry twice.

Further improvements of working conditions can be achieved by reducing stressful body movements while handling the laundry. Shortening the laundry chute (pipe) through which laundry is dropped would create more space so that the laundry would not compress against the pipe itself. As a consequence, the sorting of the laundry would require less pulling force.

To reduce bending while reaching for the laundry at the bottom of the bins, use different types of bins. For example, a bin with one side that opens mounted on a moveable tilt/lift table.

To reduce pulling and pushing while maneuvering the bins full of laundry, it would be advisable to use lighter bins with wheels designed for hard floors.

Working in the “sorting and washing” areas requires prolonged standing on a concrete floor which may lead for lower leg

discomfort and fatigue. Ways prevent lower leg discomfort and fatigue are:

- wearing comfortable shoes that provide good cushioning,
- using proper inserts to lessen the stress on the feet and on the lower back, and
- using anti-fatigue matting if practice

Drying/Ironing and Folding. The overall workload, poor layout of the workstation, improper design of the laundry bins and the repetitiveness of the work are the major risk factors for repetitive motion injuries in the “drying/ironing and folding” job.

Providing bins with one side that opens on elevating devices would reduce bending and other awkward body positions while reaching for towels at the bottom of the bins.

To reduce awkward body positions such as reaching above shoulder level while feeding the dryer/ironer, it would be advisable to use a platform.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Incorporate different tasks to change the repetitive patterns of laundry work.

Job rotation requires workers to move between different tasks at fixed or irregular periods of time. Workers in the laundry cannot fully benefit from job rotation because all the tasks are similar in nature.

In team work, workers form a team, and each member of the team shares several different tasks. The whole team is involved in the planning of the work. The team controls all aspects of work. This improves attitude and job satisfaction, which are important factors in the prevention of occupational injuries and diseases.

BEST LAUNDRY SAFETY PRACTICES

- Protect your body from chemical and biohazards by wearing appropriate gloves, masks and aprons when working with soiled items or chemicals.
- Always have a sharps container available for safe disposal of sharps found in bags or carts. Use puncture-proof gloves when there may be a risk of sharps.
- Try to alternate hands, or alternate tasks or items to reduce repetition of the same body motion for prolonged periods. For example, alternate items when folding – switch between linens & towels.
- Sorting & folding table heights should be 5-15 cm below the elbows. If the table cannot be adjusted, a platform for the table or floor could be used.
- Report any cart or bin concerns (stiff wheels, moving difficulties, etc.) to your supervisor.
- Avoid overstuffing laundry bags. Larger bags can be modified by sewing up 1/3 from the bottom to ensure bags are not heavy. Also, false bottoms on laundry baskets limit bag capacity.
- Wear closed toe, non-slip footwear.
- Anti-fatigue matting in front of folding tables provides a softer surface for prolonged standing.

FINAL WORD

Doing repetitive tasks all day can lead to overuse of your muscles. Try to vary your job tasks, rotate assignments, and take frequent short breaks to reduce fatigue and the risk of ergonomic injury.