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Actual versus Perceived Lifting Ability in Health Young Workers (18-25 years): Differences Between Men and Women

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Introduction: Younger people experience higher rates of work-related injury and illness than older workers. This is associated with the types of industry employing young workers and their employment patterns. Young workers are often employed part-time or on a casual/temporary basis in industries with high injury rates, performing unskilled physical tasks with a significant amount of manual handling. Consequently, young workers are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of this type of work.

Following injury, self reports and functional capacity evaluations are commonly used to determine a worker's lifting capacity. In an injured population, factors such as fear of pain and/or re-injury lead to under-reporting of lifting capacity and a reduced level of effort. Amongst uninjured individuals, however, conflicting views exist regarding how perceived physical functioning matches actual functioning in the absence of fear of pain and/or re-injury.

Objective: To compare self-reports and actual lifting performance in healthy young men and women aged 18-25 years.

Method: A correlational prospective design compared perceived lifting capacity (using self-report and the Spinal Function Sort), and actual lifting capacity (using the EPIC Lift Capacity test) in 31 male and 54 female subjects.

Results: Self-reported lifting capacity varied more widely than actual scores for both men and women, indicating that subjects were unable to accurately predict their lifting performance using self-report measures. The patterns of ability to estimate lifting capacity differed significantly between genders. For women, self-reports were consistently lower that actual lifting performance; however, this was not the case for men, where similar numbers under-estimated, over-estimated and were accurate (within 5 kg).

Conclusions: Possible explanations for gender differences in estimation of ability are that for tasks involving manual handling, males had higher self-confidence in their ability than females. There may also be gender differences associated with risk-taking behaviour. More targeted intervention strategies that consider gender and related behaviour of participants may need to be considered to accommodate these differences.

Contribution to Practice: Currently, there is little information available on gender-based interventions and suggestions will be presented to enable occupational therapists to more effectively educate young workers with the aim of preventing future injuries.