

5

minute safety talk



Know the Facts about Backs

Back injuries are the most common workplace injury, second only to the common cold as the most frequent excuse for missing work. While there's still no cure for the common cold, there are ways to avoid back injuries.

Facts about back injuries

To help prevent back injuries, you must understand what causes them. Contrary to popular belief, anyone can be at risk for back injury, not only workers who lift heavy objects. Your physical health has a lot to do with protection against back injury.

- **Poor body mechanics.** The way your body adjusts to keep its balance can be upset if you sit or stand in an unnatural position, twist abruptly or awkwardly, or lift something incorrectly.
- **Poor muscle tone.** Weak, under-exercised muscles rob the back of its support and increase the chance of injury.
- **Extra weight.** Excess weight can exaggerate the curve of the spine and strain the back.
- **High heels.** These deepen the curve of the lower back and force the pelvis to make up for this by tilting backward.
- **Personal factors.** Stress, anxiety and depression can cause muscles to tighten and throw your back into a spasm.

Don't back down on fitness

The harder you work, the less likely you will be to have a back injury. Take the following into consideration:

- Perform tasks to strengthen the appropriate muscles and reduce the likelihood of injury. Avoid manual tasks that your body isn't used to.
- Exercise the abdominal and leg muscles. The stronger they are, the less your back has to work.

Proper posture is also beneficial. The following guidelines can help:

- **Lying down.** Lying is the least stressful position for the lower back. Lie on your side, on a firm mattress, with your knees bent.
- **Standing.** Try to keep your ears, shoulders and hips in a straight line.
- **Sitting.** Keep your feet flat on the floor. Adjust the chair height so that your elbows are even with the work surface. Make sure you have lower back support.

Watch your every move

The best way to avoid back injury is to pay attention any time you lift, carry, reach or push. While everyone has a favorite lifting technique, some basic rules apply:

- Decide whether you can lift the object alone or will need help.
- Keep the object or load close to you.
- If you have to squat, keep your back straight. Bend at the waist, hips or knees. Never lock your knees.

- Get a firm footing and keep your feet parted, one alongside and one behind the object. Your rear foot will help in the upward thrust of the lift.
- Center the object as well as your body weight. Let your whole body bear the weight, not just your back.
- Let your legs do the work. Your leg muscles are several times stronger than any other muscle in your body.
- Grip the object firmly with the palms of your hands around the corners of the object. Keep your arms and elbows tucked into the sides of your body.
- Do not arch your back. This makes the nerve roots open to pinching and can cause strains in weaker muscles.
- Avoid twisting your back. If you need to lift and then turn, point one foot in the direction you want to go before you lift. To put an object down, follow the same procedures in reverse.
- Warm up before you lift. Limber muscles are less likely to snap or tear. A five-minute stretching program at the start of the day can prevent many injuries.

The push is on

Always push, do not pull, your load. One foot should be behind the other with your weight balanced between them. Keep your spine straight and use your leg muscles to move the load. If you have to pull, be careful. You can strain your neck, shoulder or back.

Ergonomics to the rescue

Ergonomic experts try to find the easiest way to do work to help relieve stress on your body, especially your back. Small improvements can greatly reduce your chances of back injury. For example, if you bend over to retrieve a part from a bin, place the bin at a higher level. This way, you do not have to bend so much. Try to reduce or avoid repetitive motions. Muscle fatigue can lead to overexertion, which is responsible for one-fourth of all work injuries. Take a break or temporarily change tasks to regain strength.

Be careful while carrying

Before you start carrying a load, plan where you will walk. The path should be clear of obstacles so that you don't slip or fall. If equipment such as a dolly is available, use it. Take extra care on platforms, ramps and loading docks. If you can't see in front of you, get help.

When you carry a load, remember to balance it. Try to divide smaller loads into two and carry them at your sides, one in each hand. Ask for help if you have to carry a heavy load. Never carry a load backward; it can throw off your balance.

Within reach

Keep supplies you use regularly at an easy-to-reach height. If you need to reach for an item, use a ladder or a step stool. To lift something from the floor to above waist level, carefully lift the load halfway, then change your grip to lift the item higher.