Back Safety – Proper Lifting Procedures

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Back injuries can be extremely painful and debilitating. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, back injuries account for nearly 20 percent of all injuries and illnesses in the workplace. In fact, only the common cold accounts for more lost work days.

Although there is not a specific regulation for training employees on back safety, the General Duty Clause does require employers to provide employees with a workplace that is "free of recognized hazards," and given the prevalence of back injuries in the workplace – it's hard to not see it as a "recognized hazard."

In fact, a back-safety program is key to dramatically reducing debilitating back injuries on the job.

Disabling back injuries are costly and all too prevalent. That's why your company needs more than a quick fix approach to battling back pain.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

We know when we've hurt our backs. Pain in the lower back is usually the first signal that an injury has occurred. Another signal is feeling fine while in a resting state but suffering lower back pain when sitting down or getting up. Getting around might also be more difficult, either from pain or stiffness.

Back injuries often occur when:

- An individual is lifting up an object
- Using improper lifting techniques such as lifting with the back and not the legs
- Lifting an object that is too heavy for the individual

- Twisting while lifting or carrying objects
- Repetitive lifting during a work task
- Poorly designed workstations and repetitive motions can also cause serious back problems.

Common causes of back pain from work procedures and processes.

- Exerting too much force such as by lifting or moving heavy objects.
- Repeating certain movements.
- An inactive job or a desk job,

ALL ABOUT BACK PAIN

The vast majority of low back pain is mechanical in nature. In many cases, low back pain is associated with spondylosis, a term that refers to the general degeneration of the spine associated with normal wear and tear that occurs in the joints, discs, and bones of the spine as people get older.

Examples of mechanical causes of low back pain include:

- Sprains and strains
- Intervertebral disc degeneration
- Herniated or ruptured discs
- Radiculopathy
- Sciatica
- Spondylolisthesis
- A traumatic injury
- Spinal stenosis
- Skeletal irregularities

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

THE WAYS TO PREVENT BACK INJURIES

1. **The Hierarchy**

Eliminate – The best way to protect individuals against back

injuries is to eliminate as many lifts as possible during the work day. Using equipment such as forklifts, heavy equipment, dollies, etc are the best way to achieve eliminating, handling and lifting objects by hand. Break down large or heavy objects that pose a hazard when lifting into smaller safer loads when possible.

Engineering Controls – Setup work areas that are ergonomically friendly to all employees. Install mechanical lifting devices and conveyor belts where feasible to limit handling objects. Install proper shelving and setup storage areas that keep objects and lifts within an optimal range. Keeping objects within the proper range helps keep employees from making awkward or dangerous lifts that can result in a sprain.

Administrative Controls – Use the buddy system when lifting any awkward or heavy objects. Agree on weight limits for lifting. For example, having a policy to not lift anything over 100lbs as a team without first involving a supervisor to see if there is a safer way to complete the lift is an administrative control. Also, always select employees who are physically capable of making the lifts of a task before the work begins.

Personal Protective Equipment such as back supports or back belts have not shown to be overly effective in preventing back injuries. These devices often create a false sense of security when completing lifts. Individuals should focus on stretching and using proper lifting techniques over using a back belt to keep them safe.

1. **THE LIFT**
2. **Plan the Lift**

By planning a lift, one can completely eliminate the risk of injury. If possible, use mechanical means to lift, move, and lower the materials, such as: forklifts, loaders, vehicles (transporting materials), dollies, wheelbarrows, wheel attachments on equipment, cranes, come-alongs, pry-bars…). If it is not practicable to use mechanical means, ask for assistance to help lift or move the load, or break the load down into smaller lifts. If this still is not practicable, ensure that you are capable of

safely lifting the load, and ensure there are no, trip or slip hazards along the path you plan on carrying the load, then use proper lifting procedures.

2. **Make the Lift**

   - Rule of Thumb: Look up as you lift!
   - Face the load, stand with feet shoulder width apart with one leg ahead of the other.
   - Ensure you have a good firm grip before lifting.
   - Lift with your leg’s, and not your back and keep your back as straight as possible.
   - Lift smoothly without jerking.

3. **Move the Lift**

   - Avoid reaching out. Handle heavy objects close to the body. Avoid a long reach out to pick up an object.
   - Avoid unnecessary bending. Do not place objects on the floor if they must be picked up again later.
   - Avoid unnecessary twisting. Turn your feet, not your hips or shoulders. Leave enough room to shift your feet so as not to twist.
   - Do not be tempted at the last moment to swing the load onto the deck or shelf by bending or twisting your back; it could end up being your last heavy load.

4. **Lower the Lift**

   - The same technique used for lifting the load should be used for lowering the load.
   - Watch your fingers for pinch points when lowering the load.

FINAL WORD

Back injuries are all too common in the workplace. Paying attention to proper lifting technique, asking your supervisor to consider re-designing how a job is performed, and asking for safety training are all ways you can prevent future back injuries. Good planning and safe work practices can help prevent these injuries.