Preventing Back Injuries Meeting Kit

BACK CONCERNS

Some jobs may require you to lift or pull heavy weights, while others may involve sitting at a desk all day – both of which can take a toll on your spine.

BACK BASICS FOR EMPLOYEES

The back is a complicated structure of bones, joints, ligaments and muscles. You can sprain ligaments, strain muscles, rupture disks, and irritate joints, all of which can lead to back pain. While sports injuries or accidents can cause back pain, sometimes the simplest of movements—for example, picking up a pencil from the floor— can have painful results. In addition, arthritis, poor posture, obesity, and psychological stress can cause or complicate back pain. Back pain can also directly result from disease of the internal organs, such as kidney stones, kidney infections, blood clots, or bone loss.

COMMON ON-THE-JOB BACK INJURIES

Lower back strains and sprains: Lower back injuries are fairly common among workers. Employees who must sit or stand for long periods of time may develop pain in their lower back, while employees who are very active could easily sustain a sprain. Most of these injuries are mild and may be treated with pain medication and physical therapy.

Bulging, herniated, and slipped discs: In between each vertebra bone sits a soft disc that acts as a shock absorber. When one of these discs slips out of place or is damaged, this can cause a great deal of pain.

Pinched nerves: When a disc pushes against a nerve in the back, this is called a pinched nerve. This type of injury can be very painful and can affect the neck, back, and legs.

Fractured vertebrae: Fractured vertebrae can require substantial medical care. Injuries that result from traumatic accidents, such as motor vehicle accidents or heavy machinery malfunctions, can include fractured vertebrae.

MINIMIZE BACK PAIN AT WORK

Pay attention to posture. When standing, balance your weight evenly on your feet. Don't slouch. To promote good posture when sitting, choose a chair that supports your lower back. Adjust the height of your chair so that your feet rest flat on the floor or on a footrest and your thighs are parallel to the floor. Remove your wallet or cellphone from your back pocket when sitting to prevent putting extra pressure on your buttocks or lower back.

Lift properly. When lifting and carrying a heavy object, get close to the object, bend your knees and tighten your stomach muscles. Use your leg muscles to support your body as you stand up. Hold the object close to your body. Maintain the natural curve of your back. Don't twist when lifting. If an object is too heavy to lift safely, ask someone to help you.

Modify repetitive tasks. Use lifting devices, when available, to help you lift loads. Try to alternate physically demanding tasks with less demanding ones. If you work at a computer, make sure that your monitor, keyboard, mouse and chair are positioned properly. If you frequently talk on the phone and type or write at the same time, place your phone on speaker or use a headset. Avoid unnecessary bending, twisting and reaching. Limit the time you spend carrying heavy briefcases, purses and bags.

Listen to your body. If you must sit for a prolonged period, change your position often. Periodically walk around and gently stretch your muscles to relieve tension.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO KEEP A BACK HEALTHY

- Exercise regularly to keep muscles strong and flexible. Consult a physician for a list of low-impact, age-appropriate exercises that are specifically targeted to strengthening lower back and abdominal muscles.
- Maintain a healthy weight and eat a nutritious diet with sufficient daily intake of calcium, phosphorus, and vitamin D to promote new bone growth.
- Use ergonomically designed furniture and equipment at home and at work. Make sure work surfaces are at a comfortable height.
- Switch sitting positions often and periodically walk around the office or gently stretch muscles to relieve tension. A pillow or rolled-up towel placed behind the small of the back can provide some lumbar support. Put your feet on a low stool or a stack of books when sitting for a long time.
- Wear comfortable, low-heeled shoes.
- Sleeping on one’s side with the knees drawn up in a fetal position can help open up the joints in the spine and relieve pressure by reducing the curvature of the spine.
- Don’t try to lift objects that are too heavy. Lift from the knees, pull the stomach muscles in, and keep the head down and in line with a straight back. When lifting, keep objects close to the body. Do not twist when lifting.
- Quit smoking. Smoking reduces blood flow to the lower spine, which can contribute to spinal disc degeneration. Smoking also increases the risk of osteoporosis and impedes healing. Coughing due to heavy smoking also may cause back pain.

FINAL WORD

Back injuries run up a bill of millions of dollars each year. Those disabling back injuries are no laughing matter for the workers who lost time from work or from their personal activities. The sad truth is that most of the pain and lost time could have been prevented if workers had been more aware of how their backs

function and how to safely lift bulky or heavy loads and practice proper ergonomics in their workplace.