

## Back Injuries: The What, When, and Why

As you may have learned from personal experience, back injuries can be extremely painful and long lasting. They can keep you in bed for extended periods of time, and occasionally, they may even require surgery. For some people, back pain never really goes away.

According to the National Safety Council, overexertion is the cause of about 31 percent of all disabling injuries. Injuries to the back occur more frequently than do injuries to any other part of the body, so it is very important that you understand just what types of acts are likely to strain your back and how to perform tasks in ways that reduce the risk.

### Why So Many Injuries?

To understand why there are so many back injuries, it is useful to understand what is in your back to be injured.

Basically, the back holds up your entire body. The spinal column, which runs down your back, is an S-shaped stack of bones called vertebrae. These vertebrae are connected by ligaments and separated by soft disks that cushion and protect the bones. At the center of the spinal column is the spinal cord, and from there, nerves run out to other parts of the body.



The back does its job with the help of muscles attached to the vertebrae. These muscles work with the stomach muscles to keep the spinal column in place and keep the back strong.

When you experience back strain or pain, it is usually related to the muscles or ligaments. The pain results from overusing or stretching those muscles or moving them in ways they are not meant to move.

You can injure your back with just one wrong move—the kind of thing that can happen bending over or twisting—or by a buildup of stress on weak muscles.

*When we share the responsibility for safety in the workplace, everyone wins!!*

## Protect Your Back

The best way for you to protect your back against the many back hazards on the job, and off, is to develop habits that reduce the strain on the back. For example:

- **Slow down:** Back injuries that result from slips, trips, and falls can often be prevented by walking instead of running from place to place. It is also helpful to wear shoes with nonslip soles and, of course, to look where you are going.
- **Stretch first:** Your back muscles, and the stomach muscles that help them, benefit from stretching before heavy use. It is a good idea to stretch gently before lifting or other back activity. Gentle stretches at the beginning of the day, and periodically during the day, also help keep your back muscles flexible.
- **Rest your back:** When you sleep, your back gets a rest from carrying your body around. To give your back the best rest, sleep on a firm mattress. The best sleep positions for your back are on your side with your knees bent or on your back with your knees elevated.
- **Avoid unnecessary lifting:** Whenever possible, use any type of material-handling equipment available—carts, hand trucks, dollies—rather than your body to lift. And when you transport material on a cart, hand trucks, or dolly, push, do not pull, it.
- **Break down large loads:** Break large heavy loads down to smaller and more manageable loads.
- **Get help:** You should never hesitate to ask a co-worker for help when lifting heavy or awkward loads.



You should also look for ways to limit the number of times you have to lift. If you plan tasks so that materials have to be moved only once, it means less strain on your back. Also, keep materials on shelves or tables at waist height whenever possible. Lifting from and to that height is less of a strain than a higher or lower placement.