

Back to Basics for Strong, Healthy Backs

Back pain and injuries are among one of the most common causes of lost workdays and long-term disability. About 80 percent of adults suffer from back pain at some time in their lives, and hundreds of thousands of workers suffer disabling back injuries on the job every year.

When you think about it, it's not surprising that there are so many back injuries. Just look at the back's unique structure and role. The back is made up of a complicated network of muscles and bones that literally hold up the body and control much of a person's daily movements.

So when the back's abused, the consequences can be serious and sometimes incapacitating. One wrong move can be a very painful mistake, and long-term stresses and strains on the back can cause deterioration, chronic pain, and disability.

Safe Lifting

Perhaps the most important area about back safety on the job is lifting. Improper lifting is believed to account for up to half of all job-related back injuries.

Utilizing proper lifting techniques can go a long way toward keeping you healthy and on the job. Make sure you know these simple steps in safe lifting:

- Stand close to the load with both feet firm on the floor and spread at about shoulder width, with the toes pointing out.
- Squat down, close to the load, keeping your back straight, bending at the knees.
- Grip the load firmly with your hands, not just your fingers. Place your hands on diagonally opposite corners so that one hand pulls it toward you and one lifts.
- Bring the load as close as possible to your body. Keep your weight centered over your feet, arms and elbows tucked in to your sides, and chin tucked in to your neck.
- Then lift gradually and smoothly, letting your legs do the work. With the back still straight, lift head and shoulders first while the legs push the body up smoothly.

Other Preventive Measures

Lifting isn't the only cause of back injuries. Most people put unnecessary strain on their backs in a variety of other ways. For example:

Excess weight—especially potbellies—puts constant strain on the back. That's just one more reason to watch what you eat.

Lack of exercise. Exercise strengthens back and abdominal muscles used in lifting and other related tasks. It also reduces stress and increases flexibility.

Poor posture—whether sitting, standing, or driving—is a major cause of back strain. When you slouch, the ligaments, rather than the muscles, are forced to do the work of supporting the body, which puts pressure on the vertebrae.

Bending and twisting are both strenuous on the back. Workers should try to limit bending and twisting motions—for example, by placing objects on tables or other elevated surfaces rather than on the floor so that they don't have to bend and lift.

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