

## The 3 Keys to Preventing Back Injuries

Back injuries are among the most common workplace injuries, accounting for an estimated one in five on-the-job injuries. Those injuries cost U.S. industry billions of dollars every year, not to mention the pain and suffering the injured workers have to endure. Here are some keys to preventing back injuries.

### One False Move

The back is involved in almost every move you make, and it only takes one false move to trigger an injury. For example:

- Strains can be triggered by overstretching, slouching, and improper lifting. The strain problem is compounded if you carry excess body weight - especially around the midsection.
- Sprains often result from sudden movements or sudden twisting of the body. With a sprain, soft tissues in the back, such as ligaments and muscles, are wrenched or torn, causing swelling and pain.
- Overflexion, or bending too far forward, is another common back problem that results in increased pressure on the cartilage of the spine. Damage to the cartilage, or "disks," can cause swelling and pain that can last a long time.
- Overextension, or bending too far backward, also increases pressure on the spine, resulting in potential injury.

The most important thing you need to know about these injuries is that they are all preventable. To eliminate back injuries, make sure you understand the three components of back safety — **posture**, **lifting**, and **fitness**.

### Key #1: Posture

Maintaining proper posture while working is the first lesson you need to learn about back safety and health.

When standing, you should:

- Keep your head vertical and facing your work.
- Stand straight with ears, shoulders, and hips aligned.
- Stand with feet shoulder-width apart and weight in balance.

If you have to stand for long periods while working, stand on a padded mat if available. It also helps to elevate one foot on a footrest, and switch feet from time to time - this will ease pressure on your lower back.

When sitting, you should:

- Keep your head vertical and facing the work.
- Sit straight by keeping ears, shoulders, and hips aligned.
- Keep thighs parallel to the floor, with knees bent about 90 degrees.
- Rest feet flat on the floor or on a footrest.

If you sit most of the day, make sure that you adjust your chair so that you can perform your tasks comfortably. Adjust your chair so that the backrest is firm and the lumbar support is supporting your lower back. You can also use a lumbar support pillow if you need extra lower back support.

## **Key #2: Safe Lifting**

Many back injuries can be traced to improper lifting and carrying. You need to use good body mechanics every time you lift, carry, and unload objects.

When lifting, you should:

- Face the load with feet shoulder-width apart.
- Keep heels down and turn feet slightly out.
- Squat by bending at the hips and knees.
- Use leg and stomach muscles to power the lift--not back muscles.
- Maintain the back's natural curves as you lift by keeping your head up.

When carrying objects, you should:

- Point your feet in the direction you move and walk at a slow, steady pace.
- Take small steps and turn your body as a single unit to avoid twisting the upper body.
- Hug the load.

When you set down a load, you should reverse the lifting process, making sure to bend the knees as you lower the load and letting your leg and stomach muscles bear the weight.

## **Key #3: Fitness**

If you are out-of-shape or overweight, you are more likely to have back injuries than those whose muscles are toned and whose backs don't have to support extra pounds. As little as 10 minutes a day of exercises like stomach crunches and knee bends, combined with another 15 or 20 minutes of walking or some other physical activity, can help you maintain a healthy weight and toned muscles.

Remember these five 'Musts' of Back Safety:

- Keep your back strong and fit with a healthy lifestyle.
- Maintain good posture whether you're standing or sitting.
- Be aware of your back every time you move.
- Remember the common causes of back injuries, and avoid awkward movements that can cause back problems.
- Use good body mechanics when you lift.

Oh, My Aching Back!

If you do injure your back, you can minimize the damage and pain, and get back on your feet sooner by knowing how to treat back problems correctly.

For minor injuries and everyday backaches, try these remedies:

- Cold packs can be applied for 15 to 20 minutes for the first 24 to 48 hours after a minor back injury.
- Heating pads are recommended for symptoms after 48 hours.
- Over-the-counter pain relievers can be used for a few days to take care of the pain. But always read the label on the bottle and take only the recommended dosage.
- Rest can help by giving the injured muscles and other tissues time to heal.

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