

Know the Facts about Backs

Back injuries are the most common workplace injury, second only to the common cold as the most frequent excuse for missing work. While there's still no cure for the common cold, there are ways to avoid back injuries.

FACTS ABOUT BACK INJURIES

To help prevent back injuries, you must understand what causes them. Contrary to popular belief, anyone can be at risk for back injury, not only workers who lift heavy objects. Your physical health has a lot to do with protection against back injury.

- **Poor body mechanics.** The way your body adjusts to keep its balance can be upset if you sit or stand in an unnatural position, twist abruptly or awkwardly, or lift something incorrectly.
- **Poor muscle tone.** Weak, under-exercised muscles rob the back of its support and increase the chance of injury.
- **Extra weight.** Excess weight can exaggerate the curve of the spine and strain the back.
- **High heels.** These deepen the curve of the lower back and force the pelvis to make up for this by tilting backward.
- **Personal factors.** Stress, anxiety and depression can cause muscles to tighten and throw your back into a spasm.

DON'T BACK DOWN ON FITNESS

The more physically fit you are, the less likely you will be to have a back injury. Take the following into consideration:

- Perform tasks to strengthen the appropriate muscles and reduce the likelihood of injury. Avoid manual tasks that your body isn't used to.
- Exercise the abdominal and leg muscles. The stronger they are, the less your back has to work.

Proper posture is also beneficial. The following guidelines can help:

- **Standing.** Try to keep your ears, shoulders and hips in a straight line. Using a rail or standing footrest will increase circulation and reduce pressure in the lower back when standing for long periods.
- **Sitting.** Keep your feet flat on the floor. Adjust the chair height so that your elbows are even with the work surface. Make sure you have lower back support.
- **Lying down.** Lying is the least stressful position for the lower back. Lie on your side, on a firm mattress, with your knees bent.

WATCH YOUR EVERY MOVE

The best way to avoid back injury is to pay attention any time you lift, carry, reach or push. While everyone has a favorite lifting technique, some basic rules apply:

- Plan your lift
- Have a good understanding of the weight of the load. If unsure, pick up one corner of the object to get an idea of its weight. If too heavy, use lifting aids or get help

- Stand in front of your load with feet shoulder width apart, one foot slightly in front of the other
- When lifting off a shelf or table, pull the load to the front edge of the work surface before lifting
- Make sure you have a secure grip before beginning the lift
- If there are no handles or cut-outs, grip the load on the bottom and position your hands so that the weight is distributed as evenly as possible between your hands
- Keep the load as close as possible to your body throughout the lift
- Lift with your legs, the strongest muscle group in the body
- Do not twist while lifting - complete the lift and then turn using multiple steps
- A five-minute warm up and stretching program at the start of the day and/or before you lift can prevent many injuries as limber muscles are less likely to snap or tear
- Apply all of the above guidelines to lowering and carrying as well

THE PUSH IS ON

Push, do not pull, your load. One foot should be behind the other with your weight balanced between them. Keep your spine straight and use your leg muscles to move the load. If you have to pull, be sure to verify your travel path is clear and travel slowly.

ERGONOMICS TO THE RESCUE

Ergonomic experts try to find the most efficient way to do work to help relieve stress on your body, especially your back. Small improvements can greatly reduce your chances of back injury. For example, if you bend over to retrieve a part from a bin, raise the height and/or angle the bin. This way, you do not have to bend so much. Try to reduce or avoid repetitive motions. Muscle fatigue can lead to overexertion, which is responsible for one-fourth of all work injuries. Take a break or temporarily change tasks to regain strength.

BE CAREFUL WHILE CARRYING

Before you start carrying a load, plan where you will walk. The path should be clear of obstacles so you don't slip or fall. If equipment such as a dolly is available, use it. Take extra care on platforms, ramps and loading docks. If you can't see in front of you, get help. When you carry a load, remember to balance it. Try to divide smaller loads into two and carry them at your sides, one in each hand. Ask for help if you have to carry a heavy load. Never carry a load backward; it can throw off your balance.

WITHIN REACH

Keep heavy items and supplies you use regularly at an easy-to-reach height. If you need to reach items stored on a high shelf, use a ladder or a step stool. To lift something from the floor to above waist level, carefully lift the load halfway, then change your grip to lift the item higher.