

Back Care Basics

Health and Safety Update

The back is subject to greater mechanical stress than any other part of the body, particularly the lower back and, because of this, is commonly injured. It is important to know which situations cause excessive loads and how to use proper body mechanics to reduce the risk of injury.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

A back injury can begin a lifetime of pain, inability to work or play, reduced income and cause unhappy dealings with medical agencies.

WHAT'S THE DANGER

Back injuries are either cumulative or are a traumatic injury caused by an isolated incident. Falls, a motor vehicle wreck or a misjudged dive into water are common causes of traumatic back injuries.

With cumulative injury, years of back abuse and minor strains and sprains create a problem which can be seriously disabling. Since our back is used in tasks on- and off-the-job, the exact cause of injury may be difficult to pinpoint. This leads to disputes about compensation. Therapy may be ineffective and there may be differences of opinion about your employability.

EXAMPLE

It is five minutes to the end of the shift, and the Principal has asked the Custodian to move a couple of boxes from the office to the library. The Custodian wants to leave because he has a dentist appointment right after work and doesn't want to be late. He decides to pile one box on top of the other and carry both at the same time. Not realizing both boxes combined equal 50 lbs; he lifts and instantly hurt his back. The Custodian has a low back strain and must endure eight weeks of physio-therapy and many trips to the Doctor to alleviate the pain. He has missed work, and has started a cumulative injury, which could affect him for the rest of his life.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

- Wear the correct fall arrest equipment and follow all safe work practices when working at heights.
- To prevent cumulative back injuries, lift correctly. Size up the load first.
- Lift by using the strength in your legs. Bend your knees and keep your back straight. Crouch close to the object and lift by straightening your legs.
- Don't twist, bend or extend your arms when carrying an object. Hold it as close to your body as possible.
- Don't pick up or put down an object above your shoulder height. Use a stepladder or stepstool if necessary.
- Before carrying an item, plan your route — including where you will set it down.
- Don't attempt to catch a heavy object if it falls or someone tosses it.
- Don't sit or stand too long in one position. If your job requires standing, alternate feet on a raised footrest. Floor mats can help prevent back strains of workers required to stand at their work stations throughout their shift.

FINAL WORD

Back care must be part of every activity you do. Lift carefully, practice good posture and use caution at work and off the job.