Back Safety – Stats and Facts



DID YOU KNOW?

When you think of workers' compensation and workplace injuries, there's a good chance that the image that comes to mind is of an employee with an injured back. There's a good reason why this is what you think of first – according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), roughly twenty percent of all workplace injuries or illnesses involved the back, adding up to over one million back injuries every single year. Back injuries make up 25% of all workers' compensation claims. Most back injuries that occur on the job come about as a result of lifting, and four out of five involve the lower back. If you have suffered a workplace back injury and need information about your rights as an injured worker. We are experienced workers' compensation lawyers in Lancaster, and we have a wealth of knowledge to support you in all aspects of the workers' compensation applications and appeal process.

The back is made up of bones, muscles, ligaments, vertebrae, disks, and connective tissue, and workplace back injuries can damage any of those. Though injuries can happen anywhere along the spinal column between the head and the tailbone, the majority of workplace back injuries involve the lower back. Perhaps the most common of these are disk problems, which result when one of the disks that act as a shock absorber between the vertebrae in our spinal column are suddenly compressed and ends up protruding out of its normal position. If this disk touches a spinal nerve it can result in severe pain. In most cases this type of injury is the result of improper lifting. Other common injuries occur when the ligaments that support the connections between the vertebrae in our spine are pulled beyond their capacity as a result of twisting or turning. In most cases, back injuries are a result of exceeding the capacity of the back's structures, and can result in pain and disability that lasts a very long time.

Humans are designed for hard work, but our backs are prone to injury. Back injuries lead to more lost days of work than any other kind of injury or illness.

There are a number of common back injuries that are sustained in the workplace. These are divided into two different categories: non-accidental injuries that occur as a result of normal, non-strenuous activities, and accidental injuries that are the result of an unexpected action or strain. Back injuries may result

from physically demanding jobs that require a good deal of lifting, straining or twisting, but they can also come from the poor ergonomics provided by office chairs, standing for long periods of time, or working hunched over a computer all day. Where the former can come in the form of overextensions result in muscle strains, tears, and ruptures of the discs in the spine, the injuries from sitting are often more along the lines of neck strain and lower back pain.

Of the 1.3 million reported lost-time injuries and illnesses in 2003, sprains and strains were by far the largest category, 43 percent, according the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Of these, most were back-related. Not surprisingly, construction has the highest lost-time incident rate for back injuries (51.2 lost-time injuries per 10,000 full-time workers in 2004).

It’s not only workers who suffer, but their employers as well. Not only must companies compensate injured workers during their absences, they also often must pay for their treatment. According to Liberty Mutual, the largest workers’ compensation insurance provider in the United States, overexertion injuries – lifting, pushing, pulling, holding, carrying or throwing an object – cost employers $13.4 billion every year.

Back injuries in the workplace

We spend so much time of our lives at work and rather worryingly every year there are high numbers of work-related back injuries reported:

- More than one million back injuries are sustained in the workplace annually.
- According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), a back-related injury accounts for one in every five injuries and illnesses at work.
- BLS ran a survey and discovered that 80% of these injuries were to the lower back and, unsurprisingly, 75% of these happened during lifting tasks.
- These injuries affect more than 600,000 American workers per annum, to the tune of more than $50 billion each year.
- A back injury is the top cause of a ‘job-related disability’ and a large contributor to missed work days.
- One in every five injuries and illnesses in the workplace is for this very reason.
- After the common cold, it is the biggest reason for absenteeism from work. This is a problem for both employers and employees.

Occupations most at risk of back injuries

There are certain jobs that place workers at a higher risk of experiencing them.

Anything that involves repetitive actions like lifting materials, sudden movements, whole body vibrations, lifting and twisting simultaneously or bending for long periods of time, will make you more prone.

Read on and check if your job is on the list below:

In 2016, musculoskeletal disorders involving the back accounted for 38.5 percent of all work-related musculoskeletal disorders with nursing assistants taking the most days off work as a result of a back injury.

See the other occupations close behind:

- Nursing assistants (52.8%)
- Stock and order fillers (45.7%)
- Laborers and freight, stock, and material movers (43%)
- Maintenance and repair workers (42.5%)
- Janitors and cleaners (37.5%)
- Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers (32.4%)

Workers in the healthcare industry sustain 4.5 times more overexertion injuries than any other type of worker.

US workers who suffered this kind of injury took an average of 12 days to recuperate before returning to work.

For some industries, injuries to the back result in a higher rate of job transfer or restriction, as opposed to days away from work.

For example, in general merchandise stories, back injuries result in 31.8 cases per 10,000 for job transfers, or some sort of restriction to what workers can do.

Back pain accounts for more than 264 million lost work days in one year – that's two work days for every full-time worker in the country.

In the US, back disorders account for over 24% of all occupational injuries and illnesses involving days away from work.

Productivity losses from missed work cost employers $225.8 billion, or $1,685 per employee, each year.

KEEP IN MIND

Pushing, pulling, carrying, lifting, bending, twisting: Some jobs require a great deal of physical work; but even sedentary jobs may require minor activities that can lead to back injuries. In fact, statistics show that back injuries are fairly common among American workers. According to the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA), back injuries are the most common type of workplace injuries among employees today.

Although doctors of chiropractic treat more than just back pain, many patients initially visit a chiropractor looking for relief from this pervasive condition. In fact, about 31 million Americans experience low back pain at any given time.

Interesting Facts about Back Pain

- Worldwide, back pain is the single leading cause of disability, preventing many people from engaging in work as well as other everyday activities.
- Back pain is one of the most common reasons for missed work. One-half of all working Americans admit to having back pain symptoms each year.
- Back pain accounts for more than 264 million lost work days in one year—that's two work days for every full-time worker in the country.
- Experts estimate that up to 80% of the population will experience back pain at some time in their lives.5
- Back pain can affect people of all ages, from adolescents to the elderly.
- Back pain is the third most common reason for visits to the doctor's office, behind skin disorders and osteoarthritis/joint disorders.

- Most cases of back pain are mechanical or non-organic—meaning they are not caused by serious conditions, such as inflammatory arthritis, infection, fracture or cancer.
- Most people with low back pain recover, however reoccurrence is common and for small percentage of people the condition will become chronic and disabling.
- Worldwide, years lived with disability caused by low back pain have increased by 54% between 1990 and 2015.
- Low-back pain costs Americans at least $50 billion in health care costs each year8—add in lost wages and decreased productivity and that figure easily rises to more than $100 billion.

Causes of Back Pain

The back is a complicated structure of bones, joints, ligaments and muscles. You can sprain ligaments, strain muscles, rupture disks, and irritate joints, all of which can lead to back pain. While sports injuries or accidents can cause back pain, sometimes the simplest of movements—for example, picking up a pencil from the floor— can have painful results. In addition, arthritis, poor posture, obesity, and psychological stress can cause or complicate back pain. Back pain can also directly result from disease of the internal organs, such as kidney stones, kidney infections, blood clots, or bone loss.

Common on-the-job back injuries include:

- **Lower back strains and sprains:** Lower back injuries are fairly common among workers. Employees who must sit or stand for long periods of time may develop pain in their lower back, while employees who are very active could easily sustain a sprain. Most of these injuries are mild and may be treated with pain medication and physical therapy.
- **Bulging, herniated, and slipped discs:** In between each vertebra bone sits a soft disc that acts as a shock absorber. When one of these discs slips out of place or is damaged, this can cause a great deal of pain.
- **Pinched nerves:** When a disc pushes against a nerve in the back, this is called a pinched nerve. This type of injury can be very painful and can affect the neck, back, and legs.
- **Fractured vertebrae:** Fractured vertebrae can require substantial medical care. Injuries that result from traumatic accidents, such as motor vehicle accidents or heavy machinery malfunctions, can include fractured vertebrae.
- **Degenerative disc disease:** As we get older our lumbar spine discs suffer wear and tear. If an accident increases the wear and tear, you may be entitled to workers' compensation benefits in Virginia. If a work accident aggravates, accelerates, or exacerbates your pre-existing lumbar spine disease, you can win your claim.

Here's something to keep in mind: No matter the type of on-the-job back injury you suffer, you must prove that a specific event caused a sudden, obvious mechanical or structural change to the body. Repetitive stress injuries are often more difficult to prove in a worker's compensation claim, but injuries that result from repetitive motions may still be covered in a claim.

Worker Responsibility

For workers, the first step is to get in good physical shape and maintain it.

Being overweight, especially when most of the excessive weight is carried in the abdomen, creates tremendous stress, day in and day out, on the back. Getting in shape means developing good eating habits and exercising regularly. It also may include building strength through weight training or other exercise designed to strengthen the body core.

It is also important to maintain good posture and find effective ways to manage stress.

The next thing is to learn how to avoid back injuries on the job.

Stretching before work starts is a good idea. The goal is to slightly elevate the heart rate and get blood flowing to the muscles as well as to the discs between the vertebrae in the spine.

When facing a specific task, always assess the load and decide if it can be handled by one person. See how far it must be moved. See if there are obstacles in the path. Set the task up to be as easy as possible and bring in help whenever necessary. Many tasks (stacking forms, for instance) can be done faster and safer with two people. Note that back belts do not prevent back injuries and can provide a false sense of security.

Keep in mind that some tasks can be better done with mechanical equipment. Talk to the foreman about using lifts or other equipment.

When actually lifting, bend the knees and get as close to the load as possible. Keep the back straight and use the legs to do the heavy work. Avoid twisting when lifting, carrying or lowering the load. While carrying, keep it as close to the body as possible. When finished, take a few seconds to straighten and stretch the back.

Finally, pay attention to your back and address any problems that arise. Often, a back injury begins with a slight twinge. If it is ignored, the whole back can lock up. More significantly, minor, daily back pain can be ignored, but then its cause is not addressed. Eventually, a herniated (ruptured, pinched) disc can result.

Treatment

Back injuries – whether steady, long-term pain rooted in the spine or painful pulls or knots in the muscle – require rest for recovery, although excessive bed rest can actually worsen the condition. A doctor should be consulted, especially if the pain is severe, and medication may be required to alleviate pain and help afford the necessary rest (i.e., to sleep at night).

The most severe pain is usually caused by one of the discs – soft tissue between the vertebrae that keep them from rubbing on each other – pinching the spinal cord, the long nerve that runs along the vertebra from the neck to the legs. Vertebrae are hard bones; typical back stress does not affect them. But back stress can cause the vertebrae to crush the discs, squeezing them so that they pinch the nerve.

For many people, rest will allow the discs to repair themselves, eliminating the pinch on the nerve and, thus, the pain. Appropriate exercise will strengthen the body core and help prevent a similar injury. In some cases, the pain is too

great or the condition so deteriorated that back surgery is necessary.

Surgery

However, comparisons of the rate of back surgery in different parts of the United States raise questions about whether surgery is too often prescribed. Though there is no reason to think that a given region has more or more serious back injuries than another, the highest rate regions have eight times more surgeries than the lowest rate regions.

Moreover, back surgery is expensive. Lower back pain is a condition that 80 percent of Americans will experience at one time or another in their lives. Treatment costs reach $25 billion annually, not counting another $25 billion for lost time and workers' compensation. And the fastest growing share of treatment costs is for surgery.

Between 1997 and 2004, the number of fusion surgeries (in which two or more vertebrae are locked together to prevent crushing of the disc between them) rose 127 percent to more than 303,000. Yet, the data do not show that surgery leads to an improved result.

A study published last November in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* compared results for two groups of patients with sciatic pain arising from back injuries (the sciatic nerves run down the legs from the base of the spine; when the spinal cord is pinched, it can shoot pain down the sciatica). One group had immediate surgery; the other began simply with rest. Within three to six months, both groups reported marked improvement, and after two years, about 70 percent described "major improvement." Moreover, no one who waited for surgery or avoided it entirely had a disastrous result, and no one who had surgery experienced serious consequences. The only apparent difference was that, for some, immediate surgery produced a more immediate reduction in pain.

One misconception, common among patients and doctors alike, that the study debunked is that permanent nerve damage can occur if surgery is postponed or avoided. That, simply, is not the case. Therefore, unless the pain is unbearable, patients, doctors and their health plans can save considerable expense by waiting to see if rest and exercise will solve the problem. If not, surgery remains an option.

Tips to Prevent Back Pain

There are several simple strategies that can help to prevent the onset of back pain. Among them:

- Maintain a healthy diet and weight.
- Remain active—under the supervision of your chiropractor.
- Avoid prolonged inactivity or bed rest.
- Warm up or stretch before exercising or physical activities, such as gardening.
- Maintain proper posture.
- Wear comfortable, low-heeled shoes.
- Sleep on a mattress of medium firmness to minimize any curve in your spine.
- When lifting an object, lift with your knees, keep the object close to your

body, and do not twist.
- Quit smoking. Smoking impairs blood flow, resulting in oxygen and nutrient deprivation to spinal tissues.
- Work with your chiropractor to ensure that your workstation is ergonomically correct.

Recordkeeping

1. **Identification of problem jobs**: Each employer with 10 or more employees shall establish and maintain accurate records of the identification of "problem jobs." The records shall include the following information and be maintained for at least 5 years:
    - name and job classification of employees in each "problem job";
    - copies of most recent, initial, and follow-up completed workplace risk factor check list for employees in "problem jobs", with date of completion; and
    - any other conditions that might have affected the results of the identification of "problem jobs."
2. **Job improvement process:** The employer shall establish and maintain an accurate record of most recent job improvement process. These records shall be kept for at least 5 years after job is controlled.
3. **Training:** The employer shall maintain a current copy of training materials and program used, and the most recent methods and results of evaluations of the effectiveness of training for five years.
4. **Medical management:**
    - employee records shall be maintained for at least the duration of an employees
    - employment plus 5 years and shall include:
        - name of employee;
        - musculoskeletal disorder management plan prepared by the health care provider.