Heavy Work Means Strains, Sprains

Safety Talk

In a physically demanding industry, strains and sprains could be considered "part of the job." But most workers would rather live without them—especially when the pain goes beyond being just an annoyance.

There are numerous tasks that can lead to what have become known as musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). Frequently, they involve the use of equipment and moving of materials, or working with big pieces of equipment. It often seems that everything is heavy and difficult to handle, so MSDs are certainly a concern. They can occur from a single event (such as a lift, slip or fall) or from the buildup of tissue damage caused by many small injuries. Sometimes the symptoms are obvious and painful; in other instances there is no evidence in the early stages.

The most common contributing factors to MSDs and similar problems are:

- Awkward postures
- Repetitive motions
- Forceful exertions
- Pressure points
- Vibration

Environmental factors can also lead to strains, sprains and even more serious injury. Extreme high temperatures increase the rate at which the body becomes fatigued. Alternatively, exposure of the hands and feet to cold temperatures can decrease blood flow, muscle strength and dexterity.

Workplace lighting that is too bright or too dim can cause workers to assume poor posture while performing a particular task.

The duration of work tasks plays a key role. Both the total time per work shift and the length of uninterrupted periods of work can contribute to problems. As repetitive motions and forceful exertions increase, so does the need for muscle-relaxing breaks to help reduce fatigue and prevent injury. Performing tasks that require use of different muscle groups is another way of allowing the fatigued muscles to recover.

General solutions for strains and sprains include:

- Use proper lifting techniques at all times.
- Hoist the load slowly to limit its momentum.
- Seek assistance when moving awkward, heavy equipment and tools, boxes or other containers.
- Use the proper stance and slip-lifting techniques. (Slips have three handles and should be lifted jointly by more than one person.)
- Use lifting equipment and limit the manual positioning of heavy loads.
- Practice proper hand placement and use of pullback ropes.

Whether your job has the possibility of a quick muscle pull or a nagging ache that will worsen with time, take all the precautions you can, in addition to recovery breaks.