Safe Lifting Best Practices to Reduce Back Injuries



WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Back injuries are some of the most prevalent and hardest-to-prevent injuries on the job. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than one million workers suffer back injuries each year, and back injuries account for one of every five workplace injuries or illnesses. These types of injuries account for a large majority of worker's compensation claims every year.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

Most of us know when we've hurt our backs. Pain in the lower back is usually the first signal that an injury has occurred. Another signal is feeling fine while in a resting state but suffering lower back pain when sitting down or getting up. Getting around might also be more difficult, either from pain or stiffness.

Back injuries often occur when:

- An individual is lifting up an object
- Using improper lifting techniques such as lifting with the back and not the legs
- Lifting an object that is too heavy for the individual
- Twisting while lifting or carrying objects
- Repetitive lifting during a work task
- Poorly designed workstations and repetitive motions can also cause serious back problems.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Ways to Prevent Back Injuries

Eliminate– The best way to protect individuals against back injuries is to eliminate as many lifts as possible during the work day. Using equipment such as forklifts, heavy equipment, dollies, etc are the best way to achieve eliminating, handling and lifting objects by hand. Break down large or heavy objects that pose a hazard when lifting into smaller safer loads when possible.

Engineering Controls– Setup work areas that are ergonomically friendly to all employees. Install mechanical lifting devices and conveyor belts where feasible to limit handling objects. Install proper shelving and setup storage areas that keep objects and lifts within an optimal range. Keeping objects within the proper range helps keep employees from making awkward or dangerous lifts that can result in a sprain.

Administrative Controls– Use the buddy system when lifting any awkward or heavy objects. Agree on weight limits for lifting. For example, having a policy to not lift anything over 100lbs as a team without first involving a supervisor to see if there is a safer way to complete the lift is an administrative control. Also, always select employees who are physically capable of making the lifts of a task before the work begins.

Personal protective equipment such as back supports or back belts have not shown to be overly effective in preventing back injuries. These devices often create a false sense of security when completing lifts. Individuals should focus on stretching and using proper lifting techniques over using a back belt to keep them safe.

The following must be done to prevent or reduce back injuries:

Plan your lift: Look at what you're going to pick up to determine if it's too heavy or awkward to move alone. You may need to get help or use a hand cart.

Position yourself: stand close to the object and place your feet shoulder width apart. Balance yourself by placing one foot slightly of the other.

Bend down: Squat down, bending at the knees and not the waist. Keep your chin tucked into your chest and back as straight as possible.

And lift: Use your thigh muscles to slowly lift your body. Don't twist if you need to turn. Move your feet instead of your trunk.

FINAL WORD

Back injuries are all too common in the workplace. Paying attention to proper lifting technique, asking your supervisor to consider re-designing how a job is performed, and asking for safety training are all ways you can prevent future back injuries.