Warehouse Work Doesn’t Need to Hurt



What’s at Stake?

Strains and sprains, sore shoulders and bad backs – these are facts of life if your work involves manually moving materials. Manual lifting can result in injury, particularly when it involves a heavy load, twisting motion or repetition.

What’s the Danger?

Continuous lifting, moving, and handling activities can cause minor discomfort to snowball into serious and debilitating ergonomic disorders through the deterioration of the musculoskeletal system. These activities can also cause acute trauma such as cuts or fractures due to accidents.

Factors that increase the risk of injury include the load being unstable or too heavy, large, or difficult to grasp; the task being too strenuous or involving awkward postures or movements; and the working environment lacking enough space, having slippery, uneven or unstable floors, having extreme temperatures, or poor lighting.

EXAMPLE

A worker was assigned to move items from a pallet located under a shelving unit. He bent over and lifted the items out one at a time. The next day his back hurt so much he had to miss work, and it took weeks of therapy for him to recover.

How to Protect Yourself

Access to lifting equipment, better workplace layout, and improved work habits and practices can reduce these Injuries. Here are tips for you and your employer to help warehouse work not hurt.

1. Use a stock pick or a hook to pull small, lightweight items closer to the shelf edge before lifting.
2. To apply plastic wrap to palletized product, use an automatic plastic wrapping machine and place the product on a turntable. For manual wrapping, use lightweight rolls.
3. Use an ergonomically-designed knife for opening cartons. Wear protective cut-resistant gloves with a good gripping surface.

4. Ask suppliers to provide product in smaller, lighter containers, and to provide handhold cutouts or handles on all heavy products.
5. Ask suppliers to leave the bottom of the box free of plastic so the item can slide better on the cardboard.
6. Ask suppliers to put a slip sheet between layers of product, to decrease the force needed to slide the product toward you.
7. Elevate pallets on a palletizer. This device sinks under the weight of a full pallet and rises as items are removed.
8. Have pallets regularly turned with a forklift to maintain good access to items.
9. Position the pallet on a turntable, walking around it or unloading in a diagonal pattern instead of layer by layer.
10. Keep the floor well-maintained with no ruts or bumps. Good surfaces will reduce the force required to operate materials handling equipment and will reduce driver exposure to vibration on motorized equipment.
11. Maintain handcarts, pallet jacks and walking forklifts so they can operate with a minimum of arm, hand, and finger force.

Final Word

Lifting, moving, and handling materials is a leading cause of back pain and injuries, strains and sprains, and ergonomic-related injuries of the shoulders and neck. But, it doesn’t have to. You and your employer can work together to make sure warehouse work doesn’t hurt.