



TEAMSTERS Safety & Health FACTS

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LIFTING AND PREVENTION OF BACK INJURIES

Sometime in their lives, eight out of ten Americans will suffer a back problem. Every year, back injuries disable 20 million people. Only the common cold keeps more people away from work.

Back injuries are one of the most devastating occupational safety and health problems. Lower back injuries account for 25% of all workplace injuries and 33% of workplace compensation costs. Back injuries cost industry \$14 billion each year and a value can't be placed on all the pain and suffering experienced from injured backs.

Tasks that can lead to back injuries include the following:

- ♦ Frequent lifting;
- ♦ Carrying of heavy loads;
- ♦ Twisting and bending while lifting and carrying a heavy load; and/or
- ♦ Extended periods of work in one posture.

Once your back is hurt, the back muscles and ligaments become scarred and weakened, making one susceptible to repeated injury. Most disabling back problems come from several repeated strains to the back, -not just from one specific incident. Many back problems can really be due to the constant twisting and lifting that make up the workday. The vast majority of the workplace back injuries result from chronic, long-term injury to the back. The initial injuries may occur at work, over several years. These injuries may not be noticeable on a day-to-day basis. However, the effects of the injuries accumulate to the point where one day even a minor occurrence will cause serious injury. This occurrence may appear to have been the result of one bad move, when in fact it is the cumulative result of many strains and injuries of the back.

When You Hurt Your Back

When you hurt your back on the job, letting your supervisor know is important, even if the injury is minor, in order to document pain caused by job tasks. Be sure to give your injured back plenty of rest, even if it is a slight problem. After resting the back, start slowly and easily and gradually build up your physical activity. If the pain does not go away, be sure to see a doctor. The treatment of back injuries is oftentimes a long and costly process. Once your back is hurt, you become susceptible to repeated injury, because of scarred and weakened muscles and ligaments. The most effective way to treat back injuries is to prevent them.

Prevention of Back Injuries

Research shows that a person's lifting strength is between the knees and shoulder, and it decreases as the person moves the object over the head, toward the ankles, or farther away from the body. Workers can most effectively lift loads if they are situated at a level between the shoulders and knees. Workers should avoid lifting from the floor and overreaching from above the shoulders. Loads for lifting should be raised at least 18 inches off the ground. Workers should be wary of lifting heavy loads to and from the top shelves of warehouses or storage areas. In those cases, workers should request help or the aid of mechanical devices.

- ♦ Very large loads may require mechanical lifting aids. Avoid overreaching when lifting by using ladders and approved step stools. Be sure to get help when necessary to prevent strains.
- ♦ Improper alignment of the spine can result in awkward positions which fatigue the muscles as well as allowing an inadequate recovery time between exertions. Mixing light-effort tasks within a job that involves heavy lifting can reduce the buildup of fatigue and lower the chances of injury. Also, frequent rest breaks on jobs that require heavy lifting are recommended.
- ♦ Muscle fatigue can result from extended periods of work in one posture. For jobs that necessitate continuous standing, anti-fatigue mats made of soft rubber vinyl, footrests, or stools are recommended to offer relief to the leg, buttock, and back muscles.
- ♦ Slippery floors and cluttered aisles can be hazardous when lifting or carrying loads. Housekeeping should be a top priority.

Lifting Techniques

If lifting is necessary, these practices may be helpful in saving your back:

1. Bring the load as close to you as possible before lifting.
2. Separate feet; put one slightly in front of the other.
3. Bend the knees to a comfortable degree. Leg muscles are stronger than the back muscles – it is better to bend and push up from the knees than to pull from the waist.
4. Lift the load straight up slowly, in a continuous fashion, avoiding fast, jerky movements.
5. Don't twist your body while carrying a heavy load.
6. Setting the load down is just as important as picking it up. Using leg and back muscles, comfortably lower the load by bending your knees.
7. When lifting, always make sure your load is balanced and even.
8. Never lift or carry a load above your head or on one side of your body.
9. Get help when necessary – don't strain yourself.