

Back Safety

Back disorders are listed in the "top ten" leading workplace injuries published by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health. They account for 27 percent of all nonfatal injuries and illnesses involving days away from work. It's no wonder. Your back is a sophisticated piece of machinery made up of numerous muscles, bones, nerves, and supporting tissues. It's a machine you use every day, probably in ways you don't even notice.

Just like the finest machinery, your back requires proper care to keep it working. If it's not working right, you'll suffer. An injured back affects your ability to move your limbs, your hips, your neck, and your head. Injuries to the back can be very debilitating, causing a lot of pain, time away from work, and often requiring physical therapy or even surgery. Everyone whose job involves stressful lifting or awkward postures is at risk for a back injury. Here are some tips to keep your back in optimum condition:

While lifting:

Don't bend over an object you are lifting. Bend your knees, squatting in front of the object to reach it.

Lift the object slowly and carefully, using your leg and arm muscles to lift, not pulling with your back.

Keep your head up and look straight ahead while making the lift.

While lifting, keep the object as close to your body as possible.

Keep abdominal muscles tight while making the lift.

Use the same techniques when you put the object down.

If the object is too big or too heavy to lift using these techniques, use mechanical assistance or get someone else to help.

When reaching for objects:

Do not reach for an object unless you're sure you're strong enough to lift it.

Use a stepladder to reach objects above shoulder height.

Avoid awkward stretches while reaching. These stress your back and could cause you to lose your balance.

Don't depend on structures to support you (e.g., a shelf support, a storage rack, etc.). These could easily give way if you pull or tug on them.

Exercise also plays an important role in keeping your back strong, healthy, and flexible. A properly exercised back is less likely to be injured. Your physician, company medical personnel, or other health-care provider can recommend the best exercises for you, taking into account your physical condition and the type of work you do.

Finally, a word about back belts. There's a lot of controversy about using back belts to control low back injuries in workers who don't have an existing injury. According to a report published by the National Safety Council, available scientific data does not completely support nor condemn the use of back belts to control low back injuries. One

thing that is agreed upon is that back belts should never be a substitute for a comprehensive back injury prevention program. Considering this, many companies have developed a back belt policy. If you do use a back belt, be aware that you may experience a false sense of security by wearing the belt. You may be tempted to lift loads you wouldn't otherwise lift. Remember, it's your back doing the work--not the belt! Always be alert for situations that could cause a back injury. Be kind to your back. Don't take unnecessary chances. By following proper lifting and reaching techniques and exercising properly, you'll help keep back problems behind you!