

Lifting: a daily routine

Whether you're at work or conducting daily activities at home, the potential exists for injuries to occur as a result of lifting. Lifting principles applied before, during and after working hours should lower the risk of back strains and sprains, the most common ailments that humans experience.

How big is the problem?

According to the National Safety Council, 60 percent to 80 percent of all workers will experience a back problem at some time during their working careers. Back strains and sprains are the largest source of workplace claims. Conditions in the workplace which, increase the likelihood of back pain, are called risk factors. Back pain risk factors associated with lifting include:

1. Lifting heavy loads;
2. Carrying bulky loads or loads far away from the body;
3. Frequent lifting;
4. Bending the body's trunk, as when picking items up off the floor;
5. Twisting the body's trunk;
6. Static loading (for example, holding objects for long periods of time).

If we reduce or eliminate exposure to these risk factors, we also reduce the chance of experiencing back pain:

1. Limiting exposure by providing mechanical assistance, such as conveyor systems, two- and four-wheel carts, and hoists; or by lightening the load to be lifted;
2. Engineering means, such as elevating the starting point of the lift, to reduce worker exposure to awkward postures;
3. Training (a safer way to lift should be considered when none of the previous methods are feasible);
4. Administrative controls (if the lifting is frequent, rotate the work with other workers).

Lifting techniques

If you must lift, you should select the safest way to lift - one that is free from the potential for injury. However, we can lessen our exposure by using an approach that encompasses best practices that have come about through research and application.

Here are some guidelines:

- Plan the lift from start to destination;
- Flex to loosen up your body before starting the lift;
- Squat close to the load;
- Grip the load firmly with both hands, not just the fingers;
- Place hands on diagonally opposite corners so one hand pulls toward you and the other one lifts;
- Bring the load as close as possible to the body;
- Keep weight centered over your feet, with arms and elbows against your sides;
- Keep your back straight, use the power in your legs to push yourself and the object into a standing position;
- Avoid twisting by changing direction with your feet;
- Continue to your destination with the object as close to the body as possible.

Remember, relying only on lifting techniques to prevent back injuries still leaves us quite vulnerable to pain and suffering, which can affect our ability to perform our jobs and enjoy our free time with our family and friends. Examples in our daily lives that ease lifting include:

- Grocery carts to transport items to our car;
- Bags with handles;
- Snow shovels and other tools that have curved handles like scythes;
- The carrying of items in smaller amounts or shorter distances;
- Wagons to carry yard trimmings.