



## **How to prevent back injuries on the job**

Four out of five adults will experience significant low back pain in their lifetime. In many cases, this back pain is caused by injuries, and often these injuries are workplace-related. Back injuries account for nearly 20 percent of all injuries and illnesses that occur in the workplace. They are common in a variety of fields, from construction work to health care and child care. Many of these injuries can be prevented, however.

### **Healthy Back Guidelines**

Here are some of the most important steps you can take to avoid back injuries — at work or at home:

- See a chiropractor! Chiropractic physicians are the most qualified experts in recognizing and correcting biomechanical and functional problems with the human body. Seeing a chiropractor can keep your body in balance and prevent strains and injuries.
- Use the correct techniques for bending, lifting and moving loads (see list below).
- Exercise your back and abdominal muscles regularly to provide stronger support for the back.
- Keep muscles like your hamstrings and hip flexors flexible.
- Wear comfortable, low-heeled, no slip shoes.
- Do not smoke. Research shows that smoking reduces blood flow to the spine.
- Maintain proper posture to put the least strain on your back.
- If you are overweight, lose weight. Excess pounds, especially in the middle, throw your body out of alignment and increase the burden on your back.
- If you are able, sleep on your side, on a firm mattress with a large pillow between your knees.

- Make sure that the work surface is at a comfortable height and that your chair offers good back support; sit as far back in the chair as you can to keep your lower back supported. If you can tilt the front of the seat of your chair downward it will help you sit up straighter with less effort. If you work at a computer, adjust your equipment so you can sit properly.
- Make sure that your accessory equipment (fax machine, etc.), is positioned so that you never have to twist at the waist in your chair to reach something from behind you.
- Follow proper techniques for doing your specific job. Employers and the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration have developed such guidelines for many occupations.

### **Safe Lifting**

A large proportion of back injuries are related to lifting, and people whose jobs involve frequent bending or lifting face the greatest risk of back injuries. More people injure their backs lifting something light than a heavy object. It is the way that people bend and lift that gets them into trouble.

These guidelines can help you to bend and lift safely:

- Plan your lift. Test the weight of what you are preparing to lift by pushing it with your hands or feet. Make sure you have enough room to lift safely.
- If the load is awkwardly shaped or too heavy, don't try to lift it alone. Get help, use a dolly or split it into smaller loads.
- Take your time. Don't hurry or use jerky movements.
- Position yourself close to the load you plan to lift. Reaching increases the strain on your back. Keep the load close to your body as you lift.
- Plant your feet shoulder-width apart to provide a firm base of support.
- Grip the object tightly.
- Bend at the knees, not at the waist. Never bend and twist at the same time. Never lift and twist at the same time.
- Tighten your stomach muscles. (Don't stop breathing!) Keep your back straight and your chin up, and lift with your leg muscles as you stand up.
- Avoid twisting as you lift. If you must turn, start with your feet and then pivot your body in the same direction.

- When placing a load on a high shelf, move close to the shelf. Spread your feet apart, with one in front of the other. Keep your elbows in and do not fully extend your arms as you place the object on the shelf. Remember to tighten your stomach muscles. Do not arch your back.
- Do not rely on a back belt. Studies so far have not shown that they help to prevent injuries.
- Use an assistive device such as a specially designed belt or board to help move a person.
- Take breaks. At least once an hour, or more often if you have a back problem, stand and stretch. Place your hands on your lower back and slowly arch backward.

