

Preventing Back Injuries

Five Risk Factors - Do your workers know them?

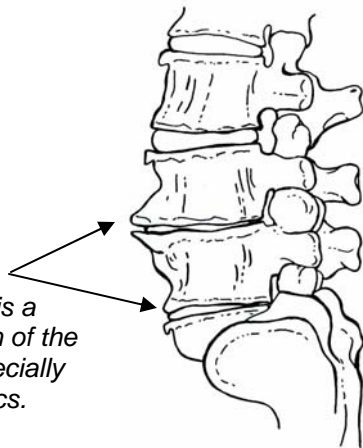
The Problem

A major problem confronting the field of occupational safety and health is the reduction of back injuries. Back injuries could be considered epidemic. During their lifetime, about 80% of the American population will receive medical treatment for back injuries. More than 300,000 back surgeries are performed annually. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, back injuries are the leading cause of lost time accidents. After the common cold, back injuries are the second leading cause of absenteeism.

A New Approach to Preventing Back Injuries

Preventing back injuries is *the* most difficult challenge in occupational safety. Most people think of a back injury as a single event, like lifting a heavy load or maybe twisting the wrong way. In fact, about 85-95% of back injuries are cumulative trauma disorders (CTD). That is, they are injuries to muscles, ligaments, or soft tissue that are the result of constant exposure to multiple risk factors over a period of time. They are often responsible for permanent damage to the back. Annual back injury training has never been an answer. Telling employees to bend at the knees will not solve the problem. Employers and employees must learn the "five risk factors for back injuries" and work to counteract them every day.

A common CTD is osteoarthritis, which is a gradual degeneration of the spinal structure, especially the intervertebral discs.



What are the Risk Factors for Back Injury?

There are a variety of ways that backs can be injured or misused. They all fall under five "risk factor" categories.

- **Repetition** – The number of back motions made per work day
- **Force** – The weight of the load lifted, pushed or pulled
- **Posture/biomechanics** - The degree to which the back is bent or twisted
- **Static Positions** – Holding a single posture (such as sitting) for long periods
- **Personal Fitness** – Body mass (size), strength, flexibility, and physical conditioning

Reducing the risk factors requires engineering, ergonomics, biomechanics training, effective job procedures, and an employee fitness program. Only by addressing *each* risk factor will you achieve a successful back injury prevention program. And remember, one risk factor plus one risk factor may not equal two. For example, lifting 50 boxes (repetition) that weigh 75 pounds (force) over a short period of time may be enough to put someone in the hospital!

Successful Back Injury Prevention is a daily activity

Preventing back injuries requires daily effort. Jobs change, new processes are introduced, people are getting older. These and other factors all play a role in the ongoing prevention of back injuries. Management must address back injury prevention every day at all levels of the organization. In other words, it must be integrated into daily activity.

For more information about how to integrate back injury prevention into daily activity, contact Team Safety, Inc.

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