

PREVENTING INJURIES IN THE WORKPLACE: BACK INJURIES

Learning to use good body mechanics at home and in the workplace can assure quality and comfort for your life now and in the future. Back injuries are way too common in our world. According to Cable News Network, four out of five adults in America will suffer from back pain at some stage in their lives. A Cornell University study indicated that back injuries are the leading result of accidents to workers under the age of 45.

The Risks: The following is a checklist of risk factors for back injury:

- I often carry heavy items.
- I am more than 20% overweight.
- I stand or sit in one position for 30 minutes or more.
- I cradle the phone between my ear and shoulder.
- I sleep on too hard or too soft a mattress.
- I wear improper footwear.
- I perform tasks requiring frequent bending
- I reach for items above my shoulders.
- I carry or lift children.
- I lift heavy objects off the floor.

The more of the above items that you have checked, the greater your risk of back injury.

The Causes: Your current physical condition may increase your risk of developing a back problem. Back problems may also develop as a result of the following conditions:

1. Poor Body Mechanics

- Body mechanics are the way your entire body adjusts to keep its balance as you move and rest.
- Poor body mechanics result in stress on the muscles, bones, discs, nerves and ligaments of the back.
- Back injury can occur if you move or lift heavy objects incorrectly, carry or lift something too heavy, sit or stand in an unnatural position, or twist your body abruptly or awkwardly.

2. Weak and Fatigued Muscles

- Weak muscles, bones, and ligaments rob the back of its support and are more likely to be injured when they are stressed.

3. Extra Weight

- Extra weight often settles in the abdomen and hips, straining the back by exaggerating the curve of the lower spine.
- Ten pounds of extra weight in the abdomen, even during pregnancy, equals 100 pounds of additional pressure on the discs of the spine, which can cause a back injury.

4. Improper Footwear

- High heeled shoes or boots can push the pelvis forward, changing the center of balance. Whenever possible, wear flat or low-heeled shoes that fit properly and provide a good base to help absorb shock on the lower back

5. Lack of Exercise

- Little or no exercise can decrease blood circulation and reduce muscular strength. It can also slow coordination and affect your reflexes, which may put stress on the back muscles.

6. Poor Posture

- Improper sitting, standing, or lying down can lead to back problems because of abnormal stresses placed on all the curves of the spine.

Prevention: Essential requirements for maintaining a healthy back:

- Stay healthy and maintain the best possible mental and physical condition. Avoid risk factors for back injury.
- Exercise to strengthen and stretch back muscles.
- Place objects often used within arm's reach, between knuckle and shoulder height.
- When talking on the phone, use a speakerphone, headset, or shoulder rest, or rearrange your writing position to free one hand.
- Modify your workstation to match your height. Avoid sustained or repetitive bending over.
- When carrying luggage, bags, or briefcases, balance the load equally.
- Avoid awkward postures, such as standing with all weight on one leg, sitting with your weight shifted to one side, crossing your legs at the knees while sitting, or carrying your wallet in your back pocket. Do not slouch!
- Avoid carrying heavy objects.
- Get plenty of rest on bedding that provides adequate support.

Safely Lifting and Moving Your Client

When transferring a client, you will need to follow these rules:

- Go slow
- Make sure you and your client are wearing shoes with non-slip soles that fit well.
- A clear path is essential for safety—if hazards (throw rugs, slippery floor, electrical cords, furniture, boxes, papers on floor) cannot be removed or avoided, plan a new move.
- Please take advantage of the features of an automated bed (if your client has one). Adjust the height of client's bed to facilitate transfers and safety. (Lowest position for transfers. Raise bed for bathing and personal care so you do not need to bend over.)
- Get help if you need it. Is family available to assist with transfer? Is there a Hoyer lift or other assistive devices in the home? (Always remember you may call your branch office if you have any questions) Your client's orientation sheet may answer some of these questions.
- Use a gait belt when possible to assist you in transferring a client.
- Explain the procedure to the client.
- Your client may give instructions regarding transfer—Please listen and follow them whenever possible.
- Bend at the knees in front of the client and stand as close as possible to the client.
- Count to three so the client is prepared and may help as much as possible.
- Keep client's legs/knees steady by placing your knees against client's knees directly or against outside of client's knees.
- Ask client to support self by placing arms on your arms or shoulders....never have client place arms or hands on your neck. If client may bear weight on one leg to help with transfer please ask client to do so. It is safer if client and caregiver work as a team.
- With bent knees—grip client firmly and lift in a smooth upward motion.
- If client doesn't need to stand upright, do a smooth pivot transfer to the receiving chair while client remains in a somewhat seated position.

Key for safe transfers: Remember to always use your legs, not your back when transferring or lifting.

Sources: National American Red Cross Workplace Training (booklet, copyright 2000).
Body Mechanics for Home Health Aides, Home Care Consultants, Inc.—self study packet.

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