

Heavy Lifting

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Low back pain (LBP) affects at least 80% of us some time in our lives and perhaps 20-30% of us at any given time. It is usually recurrent, with subsequent episodes increasing in severity. It is common in individuals engaged in manual labor and those that lead sedentary lifestyles, as they tend to have weaker abdominal and back muscles. It can occur at any age but is most prevalent for people ranging from 30 to 60 years of age.

WHAT'S THE DANGER

Low-back disorders account for almost 30% of injury requiring time away from work. Heavy lifting, pushing or pulling of objects can all lead to back injury. Workers who are physically unfit, have poor posture and are not lifting in a safe manner increase their chances of LBP. While a back injury won't kill you, it can become a chronic problem that could force you to leave your job.

EXAMPLE

A worker in the warehouse of a large online retailer is preparing orders for shipment. Most items are well within her reach and of low enough weight that she lifts them with ease. While preparing one shipment she reaches for a box on a low shelf, noticing that it weighs 50 lbs. she considers calling for a co-worker to help but decides she is capable of handling the weight herself. As she straightens her back she feels a sudden jolt of pain and falls to the ground. She slips a disk and is unable to work for 2 weeks.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

In order to prevent back injury, the spine should be kept in a neutral position and unstressed. One of the biggest mistakes workers make while lifting is bending over to use their back muscles, not their leg muscles, to lift the object. It is important to keep your back straight and use your leg muscles to propel the load upward. If you bend over to lift an object weighing 10 pounds (4.5 kg), you are actually putting 1,150 pounds (552 kg) of pressure on your lower back. Even bending over at the waist to pick up a pen can strain your back. Twisting at the hips while lifting, instead of using your legs to turn your entire body, can make a bad situation even worse.

Here are some rules to follow before lifting:

- Size up an object before lifting it to make sure it isn't too heavy for you to lift it alone. Test the weight by bending at the knees and picking up one corner of the load.
- Ensure that the size and shape of the object are manageable. An awkward load can still strain your back even if it isn't too heavy. A load that blocks your vision could lead to injuries to you or your co-workers.
- Ensure that your walking path is not blocked by debris, equipment or other workers.
- Ask a co-worker to assist you or use a hand-truck, dolly or other lifting device if you need help lifting.

How to properly lift and carry an object/load:

- If you know you can lift the object safely by yourself, position your body directly in front of the object, getting as close to it as possible.
- Stand with your feet at shoulder width and tighten your stomach muscles.
- Bend at your hips and knees and squat down close to the object, keeping your back straight.
- Lift the object with your hands and bring it close to your body.
- Looking straight ahead, use your leg muscles to propel the load upward and bring yourself to a standing position and carry the load where it is needed. Remember not to twist your upper body when setting the object down. If you must move sideways, turn your entire body.
- If you must lift an object more than once, try to place it down on a countertop or table, so that it can be moved from a standing position.

FINAL WORD

Before lifting, first use your brain before employing your brawn. Lifting even a light load the wrong way can result in a painful back injury.

