

## Watch Your Back!

The Bureau of Labor Statistics states that 80% of American workers will experience back pain in their lifetime and more than 1 million workers will suffer a back injury each year. Back injury compensation costs employers billions of dollars annually. Factor in the pain and suffering affected employees suffer and back injuries are enormous, costly issues for everyone involved.

There are two reasons back injuries are so common. First, most of us don't usually use the correct techniques when lifting loads on the job much less at home. Second is that the way the back is built lends itself to injuries.

The human backbone (or spine) is made up of small bones called vertebrae that are stacked one on top of the other. Between each vertebra is a cushioning pad or disc to prevent the bones from grinding into each other. The spinal cord runs through a tunnel made within the stacked vertebrae and there are nerves that branch from the spinal cord and service the arms, legs and all other parts of the body. All these parts are held together by ligaments, muscles and tendons. Most simply said: Not an all-together sturdy system. When these engineering issues are combined with some common place contributing factors- it's an accident waiting to happen.

Since back issues are such a common-place injury, here's a quiz to test what you may or may not know about the back and its associated injuries.

1. After a back injury, how long should you rest in bed?
  - a. At least a week
  - b. No more than 2 days
2. Good posture includes which of the following:
  - a. Having a completely straight back
  - b. Having rounded shoulders and a protruding belly
  - c. Maintaining the normal curves of the spine
3. The best way to lift an object to keep the back safe is?
  - a. Get as close to the intended load as possible
  - b. Bend your knees, keep your back in the normal "S-shaped" curve and lift with your legs.

4. Warm-up and stretching are important at the beginning of the work day to help protect the back, why?
  - a. It helps to prepare the body for physical work
  - b. Helps to slow your reflexes
  
5. Which are the best preventative measures we can take to protect our backs at work and at home?
  - a. Make sure we don't do any activities over the weekend
  - b. Exercise regularly and apply the principles of proper back care.
  
6. Back injuries are usually the result of
  - a. A single accident
  - b. Heavy or incorrect lifting
  
7. When working in the bent forward position you should
  - a. Stay in that position as long as possible
  - b. Take frequent "stretch breaks" and stretch backwards
  - c. Take frequent "stretch breaks" and stretch forward

## ANSWERS

1. No more than 2 days is the remedy for a back injury. Studies have shown that any more than 2 days of inactivity will actually make the condition worse.
2. Although Mom may have told us to stand up straight, the best position of the spine to avoid injury is to keep the back in the normal "S-shaped" curve posture. This position allows the back to have built in shock absorption to help protect the body from injury.
3. Ideally when lifting anything you want to do both of these things. By having the load as close to the body as possible, when it is lifted it will allow the lower part of the body, and not the back, to do the lifting.

4. Warm-up and stretching are important components of keeping your back safe while working. By warming and stretching the muscles needed to lift something, they are ready for the task and less likely to be injured.
5. Although the “not doing anything” option can be very tempting, regular exercise is the best preventive medicine for a back injury. By keeping the body in good physical condition, the whole system will work more efficiently.
6. Most back injuries do not happen over night, they result from long periods of incorrectly lifting loads and ignoring some of the early warning signs of back pain.
7. When it is necessary to work in ANY single position for a period of time it is crucial to take many breaks and stretch and change the body position. When bending forward, during the “stretch breaks” you want to bend and stretch in the opposite direction or backwards. The muscles of the back have been straining to keep the body in the forward position so to relieve them the opposite set of muscles should move the body in the opposite direction.

Most of us have heard of this information before, but many of us don't use it. By taking this information to heart back pain and injury and the costs associated with them can be avoided.

*For additional help with safety and OSHA compliance, take advantage of the resources available through NCMA. These resources include the NCMA Block Plant Safety Software. The software is available from NCMA at (703) 713-1900 at a cost of \$150 for up to 3 plants/year (nonmember \$450).*