

Back / Lifting Safety

Planning

Proper lifting technique is critical to back safety, but perhaps more important is proper planning.

Before you lift a box, tool, or piece of equipment, take a moment to consider your action:

- Do you need to lift the item manually?
- How heavy is it?
- Where are you moving the item from?
- Where does it have to go?
- What route do you have to follow?

Many times the item you are moving could be moved with a piece of equipment – a dolly, a hand truck, a forklift. Consider using mechanical help wherever possible. If the item needs to be moved manually, and it is heavy, or ungainly, ask for help. OSHA describes any load over 50 pounds as a “heavy load”.

When using mechanical help, remember to push, not pull – you’ll have more control and greater leverage. Fasten the load to the equipment, so sudden stops or vibrations don’t jar it off.

When moving an item from a hard-to-reach place, be sure to position yourself as close to the load as possible. Slide it out to get it closer, and be sure that you have adequate room for your hands and arms. Be aware of adjacent obstructions on either side or above the load.

Think about where the item will be placed once you’ve lifted it – will it be overhead? under an overhang? in a narrow spot? Try to allow yourself as much room as possible to set the load down. You can always shift it slightly later.

Check your path from place to place – remove tripping hazards, protect openings, set up a well wheel or a bucket and line if you need to get materials up a ladder. Make sure that the lighting is sufficient to see where you are going. Stabilize uneven or loose ground, or choose an alternate route. The shortest way isn’t always the fastest, or the safest.

Balance

As in life in general, moderation and balance are important considerations in care and maintenance of your back. You need to correct proportions of strength, flexibility and overall quality of life to eliminate or minimize back injuries. You need to exercise, eat right, and stretch as often as possible to help prevent injuries, and to recover more quickly if injured. In addition, a reduction in stress levels can help to relieve the muscle tension that can contribute to injuries.

Remember that most back injuries can be attributed to one of these five causes:

- Posture
- Body Mechanics
- Work Habits
- Stressful Living
- Loss of Flexibility

Also consider that not all back injuries are a result of sudden trauma – most are of a cumulative type, where a repeated minor injury has flared up, or continued use of a heavy tool in the same position has caused pain, or a great deal of time is spent in the same position. Remember that 80% of back injuries occur in people between the ages of 30 and 50. With expected life span in America reaching nearly 80 years, that is a long time to live in pain, or with limited mobility.

Technique

- Stand close to the load
- Grip firmly
- Bring the load close to your body
- Lift head and shoulders first, and with your back straight, Use the strength of your legs to slowly and smoothly push up
- Make sure that you can see over the load
- Don't twist your body. Torquing Action can be especially dangerous.
- Move your feet first to change direction
- Bend your knees to lower the load
- Lower slowly and smoothly
- When in doubt, Ask for Help!

Conclusion

Care and maintenance of your back is every bit as important as the care and maintenance of your vehicle, your home, or your tools, but this most important asset of our physical being is commonly overlooked or neglected.

Your back is the foundation and the structure upon which the rest of your body relies for balance and support. Used improperly, or unsafely, your back can suffer injuries that can literally change the way you live.

Care of your back is a lifelong endeavor that requires commitment, intelligence and common sense. Remember that back care isn't just about lifting properly; it is also about proper diet, exercise, reducing stress, and eliminating hazards where possible. Just as the health of your back can affect your lifestyle, your lifestyle and work habits can affect the health of your back.

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