

Back Injury Prevention

Although they are the most common of workplace injuries, back injuries can be prevented by taking care of your health and following guidelines for proper body movement. While there are various causes for back injury, the following are general suggestions for preventing injury through proper posture, overall fitness and attention to proper lifting and body movement.

Posture:

Proper posture means standing upright without slouching, rounding the shoulders or otherwise exaggerating the natural curves of the spine. Poor posture can lead to weakened spine and stomach muscles that contribute to back pain and injury. To practice proper posture, hold your stomach muscles in to keep excess pressure off your spine and allow your knees to bend slightly when standing. Remember that posture is also important when you sleep! If possible, sleep on a firm mattress, and avoid sleeping on your stomach. Sleep either on your side with a pillow between your knees or on your back with a pillow under your knees for support.

Fitness:

Exercise is essential in strengthening your core muscles and spine. If you are not already active, try walking for 10 minutes at a comfortable pace, building up to 30 minutes of walking at least three times per week, ideally every day. When walking, maintain the same good posture discussed above, which includes holding the stomach muscles in and keep your shoulders relaxed and back. Stabilizing and strengthening your core helps support your spine and further wards off injury. When doing an activity or movement that you haven't done for a while, do some simple stretches for your entire body and for the particular muscles involved, before, during and after the activity. Maintaining your level of fitness throughout the year will make injury less likely.

Body Mechanics:

When lifting, bending or stretching, think about how you are using your back. Consider if there may be a simpler method that can be used, and certainly don't hesitate to ask others for help. For example, instead of bending at the back to pick a load off the floor, stoop down at the knees and lift slowly with your legs. Keep the back as straight as possible and maintain proper posture. Instead of reaching too high overhead, use a steady ladder. Push or pull with your entire body, not just your arms. Maintain proper posture, bend at the knees and hips, not at the back or waist, and use your legs to lift. Importantly, when working with heavy objects, pace your activities and take frequent breaks, and vary the position of your body when standing.

When sitting down, think in terms of 'L' shapes, called right angles. Knees should be at right angles when the feet are touching the floor. The back and thighs should form right angles when sitting, and when using a keyboard keep your wrists straight and your elbows at right angles as well. Remember that posture is also important while sitting, so keep your head, back and shoulders relaxed. While sometimes injury is unavoidable, practicing the preventative techniques of good posture, proper body mechanics and overall fitness are the first steps in maintaining a healthy and pain-free back.

