

*From our incident files:
Safety lessons learned*



Southwest Washington Workers' Compensation Trust

Oh, my aching back!

"I lifted several boxes of books off the floor and felt a sharp pain in my lower back."
"After loading sheets of plywood into my truck I felt pain in my hip/groin area."
"When pulling two tables after parent conferences, my lower back was strained."
"I was emptying garbage cart; lifting heavy bags to the dumpster. Hour later -sore back."

You've just joined the thousands of workers who are injured or even permanently disabled by back injuries each year. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), more than one million workers suffer back injuries each year accounting for one out of every five workplace injuries and illnesses.

The number and the severity of injuries can be greatly reduced by preparing and planning for the lift, and practicing safe lifting and handling techniques.

Plan your lift. Make sure that the path to where you are taking the load is clear of obstacles and debris - such as grease, oil, water, and litter - that can cause you to slip and fall. Remove anything that is in the way.

Warm up your muscles with gentle stretches to prepare them for the physical stress of the lift and other handling tasks. This is an especially important step for workers who only lift occasionally and may not be accustomed to handling loads.

Test the load for shifting contents and weight by pulling or sliding it toward you. Determine if you can lift it without overexerting yourself. Do not lift if you are not sure that you can handle the load safely. Get help with heavy or awkward loads, or when possible use equipment such as hoists, lift trucks dollies or wheelbarrows.

Here are some general lifting rules to follow:

- Stand close to the load facing the direction that you'll be moving.
- Place your feet wide apart to keep your balance.
- Get and keep a good grip on the load using both hands - not just your fingers. Grasp opposite corners and balance the load evenly between both arms.
- Keep your back as straight as is comfortable, tightening your abdominal (stomach) muscles as you lift
- Bend your legs so they do the lifting.
- Lift the load smoothly, without jerking, keeping it as close to your body as possible.
- Keep the load in the middle, between shoulder and knee height.
- Avoid twisting and side bending while lifting. Step or pivot, turning your whole body.
- Plan where to set the load down, ideally on a raised platform that won't require you to bend down with the weight of the load. Avoid placing loads on the floor.
- Take rest periods to relax tired muscles and recover your strength between lifts.

Proper lifting and handling methods can protect you from getting injured. Learn to think before you bend to pick up an object and eventually safe lifting techniques will become good habits.