

## Protect Your Back

One out of every five workers in this country who is hurt and off the job for a day or more has a back problem. One out of every five workers who becomes disabled because of a work-related injury is the victim of a problem back. Because these numbers are so high, it's important for us to discuss how to keep your back healthy and strong.

Back maintenance begins off the job. Your back is a full-time worker, involved in all your daily activities and requiring 24-hour-a-day attention. A good diet and moderate exercise, including gentle stretching of your legs and back and toning of the stomach muscles, are important in keeping your back free of pain. But watch out if you are just starting on a regimen of stomach exercises. Don't strain your back trying to stay in shape. Keep your lower back against the floor while doing sit-ups and don't pull from your neck—pull from the stomach.

Sleep is another important off-the-job activity that has a lot to do with your back's comfort. A too-soft mattress can cause you pain when you wake up, so can sleeping on your stomach; don't do it. Lying on your side is the easiest posture for your back to take, but lying on your back is okay, too. Small pillows can help as well when placed in stress spots, such as under or between the knees.

A lot of lifting is done off the job as well as on. Don't forget, for instance, that children can be heavy. When picking up a child, bend your knees. When lifting a garage door, bend your knees. When taking groceries out of the trunk, put one foot on the bumper to get closer to the load.

When driving, sit with your back against the seat, legs bent, and with knees higher than the seat.

When you are on the job, of course, you will have to be doubly careful if you do work that may strain your back. It's important that you know and respect your limitations. Don't try to convince yourself that you are a superhero. Don't lift loads that are too heavy for you. And, consider: The weight of the load itself may not be too much for you, but the number of times you have to lift similar loads may make it too heavy. Although you may be able to lift 30 or 40 pounds easily, if you have to lift all day, the top weight should be about 14 pounds.

How much you can lift without injury also has to do with how far away from your body you have to lift. A worker who lifts parts over a workbench to put them on a conveyor two feet away may only be able to lift a five-pound load without back damage. Know your limits and give yourself a break. Allow your body to tell you when it is being stressed. If you're used to carrying 30 pounds of lead, you may not understand why carrying 30 pounds of a bulky substance can be much more difficult. But it is more difficult, so let your back decide, not your mind.

In some instances, you may need equipment to help you lift a load. Or, in other cases, you may have to ask someone else on the job to give you a hand. Go ahead and ask. Get

help. If you don't get help today for five minutes, that other person may have to do your job—and his or hers—for the five days you are out with a back strain. Don't let that happen.

Of course, as you know, there is a right way to lift so you don't hurt your back. Most importantly, don't twist at the waist when lifting or carrying a load. Instead, move your feet to turn your body. Be sure of a firm grip on the load—which you have first checked to make sure there are no sharp edges or nails. Don't lift or carry the load to one side of your body—use both hands.

Never lift from an unbalanced posture. Don't lift from one knee for instance. Watch your footing. Make sure the bundle you carry isn't blocking your view.

To stay healthy and strong, eat well, exercise, rest, and use good judgment. That way, you can keep the 400 muscles, 1,000 tendons, 31 pairs of nerves, and 33 vertebrae of your back pain-free and in working order.

