

Who's Got Your Back?

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How in the world did I do that? With all the emphasis that I give on safety in my position to prevent injury in the first place, how did I just injure my back? It was not a heavy object. I simply lifted it and put it in my car. As a Safety Officer, you would think that I would be more aware of my lifting movements. But I was not. I did not think through the proper lifting steps to prevent what I just did. As a result, I had to nurse my back for more than a week before it felt normal again.

There is not a person on the planet that has lived any length of time who has not experienced back problems of some kind, anything from lifting an object to sleeping in the wrong position. We have all been there. We know how debilitating back injuries can be. The irony is, that most, if not all of us have been properly trained to avoid back injuries at some point in our lives.

Preventing back injuries is not only about proper lifting procedures. All it takes is one wrong move or twist, without giving it a second thought, let alone a first. In my case, it was not the lifting that caused the injury, but lowering the object that did. So how can a person mitigate the potential of a back injury to themselves?

Keep That Spine Aligned

If there was one go-to step that is all inclusive, it would be this one. Any time you lift an object or are tempted to bend over to pick something up, keeping your spine in a straight vertical line will mitigate many back injuries in and out of the workplace. By keeping the spine aligned, it will ensure that when you are lifting or lowering an object, you will squat to do so rather than bending at the waist.

Bend At The Knees/Lift With Your Legs

We have heard it all before, "bend at the knees and lift with your legs". But do we? Bending at the waist is the easiest and most convenient way to pick something up, but it is also the culprit of many injuries. Lifting with your legs will force you to bend at the knees rather than at the waist. And yes, it takes a conscious effort. As in my case, lowering with your legs to put something down is as important as lifting with them. If your legs do not feel up to the task, try doing some bodyweight squats while watching T.V. or during your work break. It will not take long to build some strength so that your legs will not fail you the next time you squat down to pick something up. Along with that exercise, practice picking up light objects and setting them back down using your legs until it becomes second nature.

Keep It Close

This not only includes keeping an object close to your body while performing a lift, it also includes keeping items in reach of your workspace. Overreaching will cause other musculoskeletal disorders (MSD's) including back strain. The further an object is away from you, the greater is the force placed on your back. Redesign your workspace if that is what it takes to get things within reach to prevent overreaching and causing strain. The object does not have to be heavy to cause an injury, repetition may also cause MSD's.

Never Twist and Lift

Before my back was "back" to normal, my wife returned from work one day complaining that her back hurt from straining it when she turned to lift a box while putting it on a shelf. Two people

suffering back injuries at the same time in the same home made me sit up and take notice. Twisting alone can result in injury, but when you add the element of weight, it greatly increases the chance of injury. Do not move your upper body without moving your feet. Point your feet in the direction that you want to go. If your work involves twisting to take an item from one place to another, it could be that the two work areas are too close together. In this case, moving one work area, (bench, table, or the like), further away may be the solution because it will force you to move your feet rather than twisting your body.

This is not an exhaustive list by any means, but these key elements will go a long way in preventing injury to yourself. So, to answer the question posed in the title of this article "Who's Got Your Back?"... No one. Only you that is. You are the only one who can take the proper steps to avoid back injury. It takes a conscious effort. We must think before we lift, squat, twist, or make a move that may have dire consequences. So, "watch your back", because no one else will.