

MIDWESTERN INSURANCE ALLIANCE

Loss Control Newsletter

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Midwestern Insurance Alliance maintains the goal of providing our insureds with a wide range of loss control services. Only one of which is this monthly *Loss Control Newsletter*. To become aware of the many other services offered, contact Loss Control Manager, Keith Wertz at (502) 429-9990 or send e-mail to krwertz@midwesterninsurance.com

Addressing Workers' Compensation's Biggest Challenge "Back Injury Prevention"

About Back Injuries

It has been estimated that over 50% of working people will have some low back pain at some point in their working lives. As a result, back pain is the second most popular medical reason to miss work... the first is the common cold. In fact, one out of every three job-related injuries are to the back, making back problems the most frequently reported occupational injuries. This translates into an estimated 400,000 occupational back injuries every year.

What Are You Doing Now?

Very few employers can look at their workers' compensation loss history without seeing at least some back injuries. Yet, few employers do anything more than occasionally remind employees... "lift with your legs." Although well-intentioned, it is doubtful if these occasional reminders have any significant impact on the prevention of back injuries.

In addition to these periodic reminders to employees, employers must make back injury prevention a safety

priority. To do this, employers must first have a sound understanding of who gets hurt; how to evidence potential hazards associated with back injuries; and what are the most effective ways to reduce the incidence of back injuries.

Who gets hurt?

Many types of workers are at risk. Basically, anyone who has to move heavy objects; do their job in an awkward position (like bending forward and reaching out); hold one position for a long time; or do certain tasks at a fast pace.

Assessing the Hazards

Each job should be analyzed independently to have a thorough understanding of what employees do (physically). This analysis should answer questions such as:

- Are bending, twisting or lifting movements involved?
- Do employees work in awkward positions?

- Does the job involve physically carrying objects where the use of material handling equipment may be used?

Brainstorm and you will probably come up with a fairly complete list of potential back injury hazards to look for. A college degree in ergonomics is not needed to spot many obvious hazards on the job.

Additionally, employees can do their own inspections of their workplaces. The employee knows (or should know) his/her job better than anyone else... that makes them an expert.

Employers can also have employees from different sections (or departments) analyze a job which they do not regularly perform. Because they do not regularly work in that area (or perform that job function) they may notice things that the person who performs that job every day may miss.

Preventing Back Injuries

There are two primary preventative measures relating to back injuries. The first, and most effective is to

design (or redesign) the job to eliminate or reduce those hazards which may lead to back injuries. The second is the proper training of employees.

Injury Prevention Through Proper Job Design

When back injury hazards are evidenced, think about how to eliminate those hazards. This may mean that you will have to do some creative thinking. For handling heavy loads, mechanical aids such as conveyor belts, hand trucks, mechanical lifts, hoists, dollies and ladders should be available. Team moving is the way to go when the load is too heavy, bulky, long, cumbersome, or placed too high for one person to handle alone. Storage of materials should be another important consideration. Whenever possible, materials to be handled should be stored between the worker's belt-line and shoulders. Avoid storing materials on the floor... lifting from the floor is a major cause of back injury.

Injury Prevention Through Adequate Training

There is much more to training employees about back injury prevention than what is included below, but this is a start. Each employee should be properly trained about back injury prevention (including, but not limited to proper lifting techniques). Start now by observing your employees and correcting them if they are not lifting properly.

If employees must lift an object from the floor, have them follow these few basic techniques. Keep feet parted (one foot along side of the object to be lifted, and one foot behind the object)

- Keep chin tucked in
- Keep back straight and nearly vertical (this cannot be done

without bending knees considerably)

- Grip the object with the whole hand (remember that there is virtually no strength in the fingertips)
- Keep elbows and arms tucked in
- Pull the object as close as possible to your body (The body should be positioned so that the weight of the body is centered over the feet)
- After completing the above steps, start the lift with a thrust of the rear foot
- Avoid twisting. By simply turning the foot forward and pointing it in the direction of eventual movement, the greatest danger of injury by twisting is avoided.

Back Belts

A degree of controversy surrounds the issue of back belts.

However, two statements can be made with general consensus:

First, any lifting safety program must center around proper body mechanics. If your company chooses to use back belts, don't think of them as a cure-all... they're not. Proper lifting techniques must be used.

Secondly, if your employees wear back belts, make sure that they are worn properly. When actually engaged in the act of lifting the belt should be snug, at all other times the belt should be worn loose or not at all.

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