

Safely Lifting Awkward Loads

Back injuries are one of the most common, and costly, accidents that occur in the workplace. We utilize our back in everything we do to support our bodies, bend, sit, twist, stand, and even lie down. All of these activities put stress on our backs, but when we're lifting and moving items, we put our backs at an even higher risk of injury.

Understanding how your back works while lifting can help avoid unnecessary strain and potential injury. Your back is made up of moveable bones (called vertebrae) and shock-absorbers (called discs) between each vertebra. These structures are supported by ligaments and muscles that help keep the back aligned in three balanced curves. You know that your back is correctly aligned when your ears, shoulders and hips are in a straight line. This body position produces the natural curvature necessary to protect the back. When your back's three curves are not in balance, there is a greater likelihood of both back pain and injury.

Safe lifting means keeping your back aligned and balanced when lifting a load. But, safe lifting is only one aspect of transporting the load safely. How you move, carry and put down the load is just as important as how you pick it up. Most standard loads can be safely lifted and carried by following these steps:

1. Bend at the knees...Not at the waist!
2. Tuck in your pelvis and tighten your stomach muscles.
3. Get close to the object being lifted and "hug the load".
4. Lift with the strong muscles in your legs.
5. While carrying the load, keep it close to you, like you're "hugging the load".
6. Don't bend or twist your spine while carrying the load.
7. Repeat these same steps when lowering the object to its new position. Always bend with your knees and keep the ears, shoulders and hips in a straight line.

As a general rule, the object being lifted should not be bigger than what you can comfortably "hug" and should not exceed 25 pounds. Anything bigger in size or in weight should be lifted with additional assistance, such as carts, bins, hand trucks, forklifts, jacks, chain hoists, or extra hands from another coworker.

For instance, stalled vehicles should be moved into a service bay using a car pusher (or mule as they are sometimes called). Transmissions, engines, and other large parts should be moved via a transmission jack

or chain hoist. Often times, a transmission jack cannot reach all the way to the floor to lift the part to/from a crate. That's when a cherry picker or mobile chain hoist can be helpful. Another opportunity to reduce muscle strains in the service shop is to use a spring loaded cart to load tires when conducting tire rotations. The use of a spring loaded cart allows the technician to pull tires from the car and place them onto a height adjusting cart without excessive bending, twisting and reaching that takes place during traditional tire rotation methods.

Mechanical material handling devices are not just for the service or body shop departments. They are just as useful in offices. Consider a push cart to make departmental administrative rounds. A lightweight push cart can eliminate unnecessary twisting, reaching and bending. Forklifts and pallet jacks are helpful in part's departments, when large equipment or bulk items are delivered to the dealership. A forklift is the perfect substitute for manually lifting these heavy items.

And what about parts delivery? Consider a lift gate. Lift gates can be attached to the rear of your delivery truck and can be raised/lowered for quick and easy offloading with minimal need for manual lifting by your employees.

Lifting safely is essential to staying healthy, happy, and full of life. If you injure your back, you cannot enjoy those pleasures that life has to offer. So in closing, before you or your employees consider lifting an object, be sure to ask this question first. Can I lift this item safely, or is there a device available that can do the lifting for me? Make a wise choice - Lift Safely!

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