

Who's got your back? You.

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According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 31,570 back injuries reported nationwide by local government employees in 2013. Of these injuries, nearly 17,000 were due to overexertion in lifting and handling. On average, local government employees were off work for 10 days for a back injury involving lifting as opposed to seven days for back injuries where lifting was not the cause.

For Municipal Workers Compensation Fund (MWCF) members, there were just under 500 back injuries due to lifting reported from 2010 through 2014. When compared to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, this number shows that our members have taken back safety seriously and made proper lifting and handling a priority. While this is encouraging, a close look at the accident reports for back injuries involving lifting indicates that the Loss Control Division, as well as our members, needs to continue emphasizing back safety. The total incurred loss for back injuries for the same five year period was nearly \$3.3 million dollars. If you were to just do the math, it would appear that the average back claim is not that costly and the potential risk for each employee is low. Unfortunately, however, a closer look at the numbers coupled with each accident description shows that *every* back injury has the potential to be a life-altering, debilitating accident.

Of the nearly 500 back injuries reported to MWCF, 23 percent of the claims resulted in a loss time accident and accounted for nearly 90 percent of the total cost incurred. This means that the **medical only claims**, where no other workers comp benefits were paid other than medical bills, were the majority of back injury claims but only accounted for just over 10 percent of the incurred cost. Analyzing only those claims that exceeded the average claims cost for each year shows that just 15 percent rose above average cost; however, those claims accounted for 87 percent of the total cost incurred. These numbers suggest the same thing as analyzing lost time accidents: a smaller percentage of claims are going to be really bad but when they occur, they will generally be life altering and debilitating accidents for your employees.

The problem I see when reading the accident reports is that the back injury accident descriptions, are all very different in nature. Yes, most of the time lifting or carrying an object was involved; however, there are more variables to consider when studying back injuries such as age of the employee, work being performed, weight of the object lifted, environmental conditions and any other contributing factors. When reviewing the back injuries from 2010 through 2014, none of these variables stood out as the main cause or indicator of a serious injury. Many times, a seemingly easy task resulted in a costly, serious injury whereas a very difficult task or heavy lifting resulted in a minor injury where the employee returned to work very quickly. My point: it's nearly impossible to predict which activity is going to produce a serious injury when dealing with your back. To protect our employees, we must *always* make back safety, particularly proper lifting and handling, a top priority. Training employees on general back safety and proper lifting techniques should occur regularly and at a minimum of twice a year.

Avoid lifting and bending whenever you can. Anytime you can spare your back the stress and strain of lifting and bending, do so! However, since you can't always avoid lifting, there are ways to reduce the amount of pressure placed on the back. By bending the knees, you keep your spine in a better alignment and essentially eliminate the lever principle forces. Bending your knees allows your legs to do the work so you're not using your back like a crane.

Injury Prevention

- **Warm Up.** Warm muscles are less prone to injury than cold muscles. If you know that you're going to be doing work that might be hard on your back, take the time to stretch your muscles before starting – much like a professional athlete would do before a workout. This will help you avoid painful strains and sprains.
- **Plan your lift.** Before lifting, plan your route and make sure there are no obstacles between you and your destination.
- **Keep the load in the "Power Zone"** – the area or height between your knees and your shoulders.
- **Lift with your legs.** Keep your back straight. Lift gradually (without jerking), using your leg and abdominal muscles.
- **Keep the load close to your body.** Holding it away from you multiplies the load on your spine.
- **Minimize the carry distance of heavy objects.** When possible, use carts or hand trucks.
- **Change directions by pointing your feet in the direction you want to go and turning your whole body.** Avoid twisting at your waist while carrying a load.
- **Get assistance** when lifting heavy objects or use mechanical assistance when available.
- **Never allow horseplay** or "contests" when lifting or moving objects.
- **Rest your back.** Take frequent, short (micro) breaks. Stretch. If you've been working in an awkward position for a long time and then feel stiff and sore when you stand, you were in the position too long. Taking periodic one-minute stretch breaks can help you avoid discomfort.
- **Slow down!** If you're doing a lot of heavy, repetitive lifting, take it slowly and allow yourself more recovery time between lifts. Don't overdo it!

