

Low Back Pain in Workers

Low back pain is very common. Each year, one in five Canadians visits a doctor for back pain. Many back problems are due to injuries in the workplace, although this is often not recognized. This is because most back pain at work develops over a period of time as a result of improper working conditions.

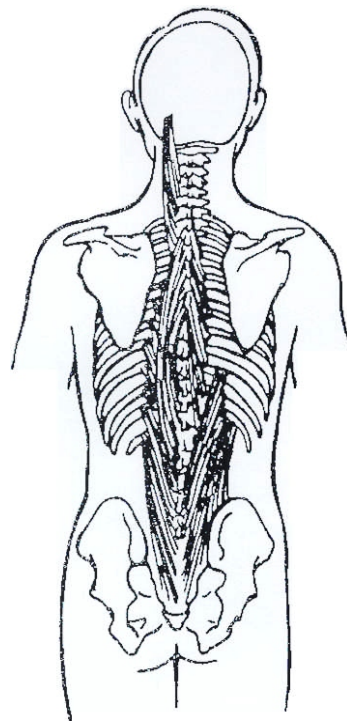
How Does Your Back Work?

Your back supports you in the upright position and is capable of a wide range of movements. In addition to bones, joints and cartilage it has numerous small and large ligaments for **stability** and several layers of powerful muscles for **movement**. The different components of the back are

- ✓ Joints that act as a pivot for movement.
- ✓ Cartilage and discs that work as shock absorbers inside joints.
- ✓ Ligaments are strong bands that stabilize joints.
- ✓ Muscles move bones around joints.

Risk Factors for Back Injury

- Heavy Physical Work
- Prolonged Standing or Sitting
- Frequent Bending and Twisting
- Lifting, Pushing and Pulling
- Repetitive Work
- Whole Body Vibration (e.g., truck driving)
- Poor Work Organization
- Low Job Control



- ✓ Nerves relay messages from these structures to the brain.
- ✓ Blood vessels bring oxygen and nutrients to facilitate the work of these structures.

What Goes Wrong?

The back's complex structure enables it to tolerate great loads. In most cases back pain is the result of strain on the soft tissues of the back, such as muscles, tendons and ligaments. These tissues can be injured if this tolerance is exceeded. It is often difficult to accurately pinpoint which muscles or ligaments have been damaged as a result of an injury.

It is important to remember that once injured, the back can become susceptible to re-injury especially if there are risk factors in the workplace that are not corrected. Risk factors are aspects of a task that are associated with an increased risk of developing an injury. The risk is increased further if there is a combination of two or more risk factors found in the same task.

How can your employer prevent back injuries at work?

Your employer is responsible to provide a safe and healthy work environment. Your employer can prevent back injuries by developing an ergonomics program with your health and safety committee. Ergonomics is a science that studies people and the work they do. It tries to fit the work to the worker so you can perform your job in a safe, comfortable and efficient way.

The health and safety committee should develop a program that identifies and reduces the risks for back injury in the workplace by using ergonomic principles. The committee should involve workers to identify problem jobs and suggest ways to improve them.

Ergonomic Principles to Prevent Back Injuries

- locate objects within easy reach
- provide all materials at a work level that can be adjusted to the worker's body size
- change work area layout to reduce lifting distances
- provide mechanical aids for lifting and train workers to use them properly
- assign more time for repetitive tasks to reduce frequency and allow more rest periods
- eliminate deep shelves to avoid bending
- alternate heavy tasks with lighter ones
- educate workers on proper lifting, lowering, carrying, pushing and pulling techniques
- avoid slippery surfaces and uneven floors and sidewalks
- service and repair equipment and tools regularly

What should you do if you hurt your back?

Report any pain or injury to your supervisor or employer immediately. This may help to identify hazards and correct working conditions before an injury occurs.

See your doctor if you hurt your back at work or have any pain, numbness, tingling or changes in urination or bowel functions. Many back problems occur slowly and get worse over time. Proper diagnosis is needed for relief of pain and healing.

For further information please contact the

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How can you prevent a back injury?

- push instead of pull
- pull instead of carry
- avoid lifting heavy loads. Split loads into smaller loads, use mechanical aids, or ask another worker for help to lift.*
- avoid twisting
- wear proper footwear that provides a good foothold
- exercise regularly to strengthen your muscles and increase your flexibility

* See our **Lifting Safely** fact sheet for more tips on proper lifting.