



Housekeeping

by William D. Frye, Ph.D., CHE

Back injuries remain the nation's number one workplace safety problem

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Preventing back injuries is a major workplace safety challenge in any industry. The lodging industry is no exception, especially in housekeeping departments. On-premise laundry workers who load and unload heavy loads of linens, housemen who transport soiled and freshly laundered linens or trash, and room attendants who flip mattresses on a regular basis are all prime candidates for a lower back injury.

The extent of the problem

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), more than one million workers in the United States suffer back injuries each year, with back injuries accounting for one of every five workplace injuries or illnesses. One-fourth of all compensation indemnity claims involve back injuries, costing industry billions of dollars on top of the pain and suffering borne by employees. In 2003, the year for which the most recent statistics are available, nonfatal injuries to leisure and hospitality workers accounted for 9.7% of all nonfatal workplace injuries. This corresponds to 45,300 reported cases of hotel workplace injury or illness and resulted in 24,100 cases of missed days from work and 21,200 cases where the employee was assigned to restricted duty or temporarily transferred to another position. In the U.S. lodging industry for 2003, 6.7% of the workforce had some recorded nonfatal workplace-related injury or illness. By far, the majority of these injuries were back injuries.

Lower back injuries abound

Muscular-skeletal injuries of the back are primarily brought on through lifting, placing, carrying, holding and lowering objects and materials in the workplace. The BLS survey shows that four out of five of these injuries were to the lower back, and that three out of four occurred while the employee was lifting. No approach has been found for totally eliminating back injuries caused by lifting, though it is felt that a substantial portion can be prevented by an effective control program and ergonomic design of work tasks.

Back injury prevention techniques

Executive housekeepers should take reasonable precautions to minimize opportunities for back-related injuries to their employees. These steps include:

- Require all employees to follow safe lifting procedures.
 - Reeducate employees about safe lifting techniques on a periodic basis.
 - Encourage employees to work in teams to lift, move, or flip heavy or bulky materials.
 - Have employees utilize carts, hand trucks, winches, and laundry slings to transport or move heavy loads.
 - Require employees who frequently move or lift heavy loads to wear back brace supports.
 - Keep track of all on-the-job injuries to discern injury patterns or workplace practices that cause injuries.
 - Reward personnel with a party or other recognition if the housekeeping or laundry department completes six months without an on-the-job injury.
 - Enforce compliance of safe lifting habits through supervisor observations and implementation of progressive discipline



Conclusion

All employees are required to lift items and materials of varying weights, shapes, and sizes. If employees follow proper lifting techniques, the risk of on-the-job lower back injuries can be avoided or minimized. Once an employee's back has been injured, typical recovery may require light duty, bed rest, physical therapy, or surgery. Each of these treatments bears a cost to the employer and results in lost time and productivity for the housekeeping department, as other employees may be forced to work overtime or pick up the slack.

Once an employee incurs a back injury, it will become much easier for the back to suffer re-injury, even after initial healing. The general train of thought is that no one ever fully recovers from a back injury one-hundred percent. Rather, employees learn to live with discomfort, a reduced range of motion, and/or a dependency on pain killers or muscle relaxants. Proactive and preventive measures to prevent back injury are in the best interest of the employees, the housekeeping department, and management and ownership. ✧

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Safe Lifting Techniques

1. **TUCK YOUR PELVIS** – This will tighten the stomach muscles, and keep the back straight and in balance while lifting. It also shifts the weight of the employee more under the object to be lifted or carried.
2. **BEND YOUR KNEES** – By bending at the knees instead of the waist, the back remains straight and achieves a sense of balance. The strongest muscles in a human's body are the leg muscles; the strongest bone is the femur or upper leg bone. Therefore, let the legs, and not the arms, waist, or back do the lifting.
3. **"HUG" THE LOAD** – Keep the object being lifted as close to the body as possible while straightening the legs to a standing position. Loads carried at arm's length from the torso create a different center of gravity and place excessive and unneeded strain on multiple parts of the body.
4. **AVOID TWISTING** – Never twist at the waist or shoulders, this can overload the spine and lead to serious injury. Move the load as a single unit in conjunction with the entire body. Always keep the feet, knees, and torso pointed in the same direction when lifting.

