

*Pain in the Back:*

# REDUCING SPINE PROBLEMS IN THE WORKPLACE

Human beings push their spines to the limit, literally. From how we walk (upright, on two legs, unlike most of our animal counterparts), to the amount of time we spend sitting, the way we sleep to the way we lift heavy objects.

*It's no wonder that [half of all working Americans](#) admit to having back pain each year, becoming the single leading cause of physical disability worldwide.*

The first step to understanding how HR leaders can mitigate back pain in the workplace is to understand how it occurs in the first place. Let's examine [three leading causes](#):

## **#1 Inactivity**

sitting at a desk with poor back support or poor posture and having little exercise in our normal day-to-day activities.

## **#2 Repetition**

twisting and bending your back repeatedly in a way that creates strain.

## **#3 Force**

lifting heavy objects improperly, using your back to lift rather than leg muscles.

## HOW ARE YOUR PEOPLE AT RISK?

Depending on your employee population, and the average age of your work population, individuals may be at risk from any of these causes. If you have a largely sedentary population, inactivity is going to be your leading cause. If your employees are out in the field, driving at work or working in labor-intensive positions, they could experience injury through either repetition or force.

Or, you might have different segments of your employee population that's are at risk for all three.

## HOW CAN HR LEADERS HELP?

### **Communicate the Importance of Posture**

Whether you communicate through posters, a quick meeting, or email tips, helping your employees understand the importance of posture can go a long way.

### **Ensure Access to Proper Seating**

For employees that sit at a desk, ergonomics is crucial. Ensure that workstations are assessed and chairs are adjustable so that employees can rest their feet flat on the floor (or on a foot rest), their chair supports their spine, and their forearms are parallel to their thighs.

### **Proper Lifting Technique**

The same way weightlifters spend a great deal of time perfecting their technique, so should employees who may be lifting objects throughout the day. If possible, bring in a personal trainer or weightlifter who can demonstrate proper squatting and lifting position, focusing on tightening the quad, and lifting from the legs.

### **Modify Tasks that Cause Twisting or Strain**

Variety is the spice of life, and mitigating repetition when it comes to strenuous tasks can go a long way. If employees are at their workstation, see if they can intersperse sitting tasks with other tasks involving moving etc. Encourage walking breaks or install standing desks so they can modify their position throughout the day.

For employees in the field, lifting devices can help reduce strain from repeat lifting, as well as protocol that demonstrates how employees should lift as a team or in groups.

For employees who spend significant time driving a vehicle it's essential to ensure they adjust the seat correctly for safe posture and take appropriate breaks.

### **Encourage Stretching**

Just like stretching is important when traveling on a long flight, so it is for individuals sitting at desks. Encourage a daily ten minutes of stretch time, and share easy-to-remember stretching exercises throughout the day to help keep muscles loose and reduce tension on the body.

*“With over 30 years working in Occupational Medicine I still see a significant number of employees with back pain. Back pain is a major health concern for workers and is likely to affect 80% of adults during their working lifetime. It impacts performance, engagement and absenteeism.*

*I believe that if the time, resource and expenditure spent managing the absent employee with back pain was invested in a proactive business approach in managing the working environment and developing wellbeing programs it would be a win-win situation for all!”*

***Dr. David Batman***

## WHAT ABOUT OUTSIDE THE OFFICE?

While an employee's free time is their own, general lifestyle can affect muscles and back. Being overweight or obese puts extra strain on your back continually 24 hours a days, having a mattress on your bed which has not been changed for over 5 years adds to problems, and being 'stressed' adds muscle tension to the neck and upper back which does not help posture.

It's helpful to educate your workforce on their general wellbeing and activities that can help strengthen their core and back muscles outside of the workplace.

Exercises like yoga and swimming help build muscles that better support spinal structure and place less strain on joints. Even walking strengthens core muscles and is low impact. You cannot prevent aging but you can minimize long-term risk!

## LASTLY, ENCOURAGE SMOKING CESSATION

Smoking affects the spine in unexpected ways. Smoking cigarettes reduces blood flow to the lower spine, which increases healing time and contributes to spinal disc damage. Even the repetitive coughing associated with smoking causes pressure on the spine over time.

Does your workplace offer a smoking cessation program? Creating a shame-free environment where employees can encourage one another and receive support to quit smoking can help individuals quit for good and dramatically improve their long-term health prognosis.



Want to learn more about creating lasting behavior change and encouraging wellbeing in your workplace?

Download our **The Future of Performance Management**, and help employees build the habits that drive business results.

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