Staff Safety Training on Preventing Back Injuries

One of the most common and costly injuries sustained by workers involves the spinal column, or the strain and sprain of muscles, tendons and ligaments of the back. Every day veterinary hospital workers and clinicians suffer from job-related back injuries. You can use this information in an upcoming safety training to ensure that staff is familiar with proper lifting techniques and the easy actions that can be taken to ensure spine, muscle and back health.

The Spinal Column

The spinal column consists of a series of 26 movable bones called vertebrae. These are kept in line by ligaments and muscles. If muscles strain to provide support, backache and even pinched nerves may result. Located between each pair of vertebrae are the spinal discs, which contain a viscous fluid. When the vertebrae are flexed during normal activity, the discs act as a shock absorber to the vertebrae.

The Principles of Safe Lifting Practice Before You Start

- **Think about the job.** How much does the item weigh? Does it need carrying or can a hand truck be used? Am I warmed up and ready to perform this task? Am I dressed for the job?
- **Think about what you are going to do before you do it.** Where is the item going? Does it need more than one person to lift it safely? Can I avoid having to twist when lifting or putting the load down?

Lifting Technique

- Place your feet apart to make a stable base for lifting.
- Keep your back straight and chin tucked in.
- Keep shoulders level and facing the same direction as your hips.
- Lift smoothly and with your head first, avoiding jerky movements.
- Grip the load with your palms, not just your fingers.
- Keep your arms close to your body to help support the load.

Dividing Heavy Loads

- Keeping loads close to you when lifting will help reduce pressure on the spine.
- If the load is too large or obstructs your view, seek assistance.
- Dividing heavy loads into two or three loads when carrying will help maintain balance.

Moving the Load

- When carrying, keep the load as close to the body as possible.
- Keep the heaviest side of the load closest to your body.
- When pushing or pulling, use your body weight to move the load.
- Avoid twisting your body when turning.
- When pulling a dolly, make sure you go backwards and have someone follow behind to make sure nothing slips. Don’t overload the dolly. It’s better to make more trips than to risk injury.

Maintaining Back Health

Good posture creates a better back. With good posture, the backs of your head, heels and sacrum (base of the spine) should be in line. Backache and spinal problems may stem from poor posture. Some everyday improvements include standing instead of sitting. With each degree of inclination, spinal pressure increases dramatically.

Swimming is an excellent exercise to take pressure off the spine and to strengthen the abdominal muscles that support it.

Flexibility exercises can be done at home as well as in the workplace. These include simple stretches and strengthening exercises for the muscles that surround the spine, as well as the abdominal muscles.

Good nutrition and adequate sleep also play important roles in maintaining a strong body and avoiding back injuries, strains and sprains.

This article provides general information and procedures that may apply to many business operations; however, it is not a comprehensive treatise on the subject, nor a “turnkey” plan to be implemented. Consult with your staff and/or specialists to determine how best this information may guide you to specific plans for your operations. Be sure to check with your medical provider before starting any exercise and strength training program. Additionally, this article does not substitute for legal advice, which should come from your own counsel. These materials are intended solely for the use of Fireman’s Fund Insurance Company, its customers and agents and solely for educational purposes. Use by any other person is strictly prohibited.