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Have Your Own Back

The back is one of the hardest working parts of the body, but it also is one of the most neglected. We rely on our backs to lift, pull, hold us upright, and more. But all too often we take advantage of its flexibility, strength, and capabilities. This happens even more on busy construction jobsites where physically challenging tasks are carried out for long hours.

According to CPWR—The Center for Construction Research and Training, formerly known as The Center to Protect Workers' Rights, the construction industry has the highest incident rate of back injuries of any industry, besides transportation. Of all the construction-related injuries that occur each year, 25% of them are back injuries. Depending on the severity, back injuries can cause the average worker to miss from 7 to 30 workdays—adding up to a substantial loss in income for the employee and productivity for the employer.

Most back injuries, typically sprains and strains, occur in the lower back due to activities where you lift, lower, carry, push, or pull. The risk of injury increases if you repeatedly carry heavy loads and must twist your back, or if you tend to work bent over or in awkward positions. Rebar tying, handheld surface grinding, and hand finishing are just a few concrete-related tasks that have the potential to cause back injury.

Although working around heavy loads is part of the job, straining yourself doesn't have to be. With a little training and planning, you can change the way you approach your work to reduce the risk of permanent damage. CPWR has some tips on how to reduce back strain.

- **Cut down on carrying.** Have materials delivered close to where they will be used.
- **Try to store heavier materials at waist height.**
- **Raise your work to waist level,** if you can.
- **Make sure floors and walkways are clear and dry.** Slips and trips are a big cause of back injuries.
- **Take rest breaks.** When you are tired, you can get injured more easily.
- **Use carts, dollies, forklifts, and hoists** to move materials—not your back.

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- **Use carrying tools with handles** to get a good grip on odd-shaped loads.
- **If materials weigh more than about 50 pounds, do not lift them by yourself.** Get help from another worker or use a cart.
- **When lifting or carrying materials,** keep the load as close to your body as you can.
- **Try not to twist** when lifting and lowering materials. Turn your whole body instead.
- **Lift and lower materials in a smooth, steady way.** Try not to jerk to lift.
- **When you pick up materials off the ground,** try supporting yourself by leaning on something while lifting. Also don't bend over; instead, kneel on one knee and pull the load up on to your knee before standing. Make sure to wear knee pads when you kneel.

A quick note on back belts: A study conducted by NIOSH found no evidence that back belts prevent injuries. So unless a doctor prescribes one to help with a back injury recovery, don't depend on a back belt to protect you. Instead, change the lifting work. **CC**

CPWR—The Center for Construction Research and Training offers construction safety solutions at www.cpurconstructionsolutions.org. The database features health hazards and practical solutions for owners, contractors, and construction workers.



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