

Pinnacol Pointers for Safety Group Programs

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Simple Steps Toward Safe Lifting in the Workplace

Manual material handling which includes lifting, pushing, pulling and carrying materials without mechanical assistance, is one of the leading causes of injury in the workplace. In 2011, strains from lifting alone were the #1 most common cause of injury for Pinnacol policyholders, accounting for 3,849 workers' comp claims in 2011.

The two most common injured areas of the body related to manual material handling are the low back and shoulders and the average claims cost of a back injury from lifting is more than \$10,000. Most damage to the low back and shoulders occurs when employees handle materials over a long period of time; injuries result from the cumulative effect of lifting on soft tissues. Therefore, it's important to remember safe work practices when handling any material, not just when lifting a very heavy item. The best approach to avoiding injury is a combination of methods that can reduce or eliminate employee exposure to manual materials handling.

Engineering controls

Change or modify tools, equipment or machinery to reduce the physical demands of the job. Use assistive devices (e.g., crane, forklift, conveyor) to handle materials. These and other engineering controls are the preferred method for addressing lifting hazards since they're the only way to *eliminate* hazards completely.

Work Practice Controls

Change the way job tasks are performed to reduce the frequency and duration of risk exposure. For example, reorganize the order of job tasks to allow muscle recovery between tasks that require excessive force. Instead of picking up and dumping trash at a job site once at the end of the shift, walk through the site every few hours to pick up and dump trash; this practice allows recovery time for the back and shoulder muscles. This reduces muscle fatigue, as well as the weight of the trash you lift.

Administrative Controls

These include job rotation, job enlargement and gradual introduction to work, such as a pre-shift warm-up and stretching program. Another administrative control is team lifting for certain heavy or awkward materials. Whenever team-lifting an item, try to match up workers in size and strength, and use commands to synch movements (e.g., "lift on 3, ready...1-2-3").

Training Controls

Make employees aware of low-back pain early warning signs, the importance of early reporting, biomechanics of the spine, risk factors for injury and proper body mechanics when manually handling materials. Some useful tips when training employees on proper technique:

- Get as close to the load as possible before lifting it, and keep the load close once you've lifted it. If possible, slide the load toward you before picking it up.
- Make sure your footing is secure. Do not lift objects that obscure vision and footing. Plan ahead, and make sure that your travel path is clear of obstructions and that there are no slip hazards, such as a wet floor.
- Do not twist while lifting! Move your feet so they point in the direction of the lift as you turn. Lift smoothly and slowly, and do not jerk the load.

Pinnacol Resources

For more information on safe lifting in the workplace, as well as a sample list of detailed lifting guidelines, visit the [Safety By Hazard page](#) at Pinnacol.com. Additional resources are available from the [Occupational Safety & Health Administration's ergonomics web page](#) and the [National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health \(NIOSH\)](#). NIOSH and California OSHA also have an excellent [booklet with guidelines on manual material handling](#). Or call Pinnacol's Safety On Call hotline at 303.361.4700. Our safety services team stands ready to answer questions and help you take next steps toward safe lifting in the workplace.

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