

# Strains & Sprains /Back Safety

## Quick Reference

### Why This Matters: OSHA & Legal Framework

#### OSH Act, Section 5(a)(1) — General Duty Clause

Employers must provide a workplace free of recognized hazards likely to cause serious harm. OSHA states that lifting and back injury hazards may be addressed under this clause.

#### 29 CFR 1910.176 — Handling Materials, General

Storage and material-handling practices must not create hazards. Housekeeping in storage and work areas must prevent trip hazards.

#### 29 CFR 1910.22 — Walking-Working Surfaces

Floors and work areas must be kept clean, orderly, and free of hazards. Employers must provide safe access and egress at all times.

#### OSHA Computer Workstations eTool

OSHA recommends workstation setup that supports neutral posture and encourages movement throughout the day to reduce ergonomic stress for office workers.

### Safety Message

#### Lift Smart

Test the weight, bend at the knees, and use your legs — not your back.

#### Keep It Close

The closer the load is to your body, the less strain on your spine.

#### Avoid the Twist

Turn with your feet. Never rotate your spine while carrying a load.

#### Clear Your Path

A clean, organized work area prevents slips, trips, and the injuries that follow.

#### Report Pain Early

Don't wait. Early reporting turns a minor strain into a quick recovery.

# Common Causes of Strains & Sprains

Back injuries rarely happen from a single dramatic event. Most result from everyday habits and conditions that accumulate over time — or from one unguarded moment of poor technique. Recognizing these causes is the first step toward prevention.



## Lifting Too Much Alone

Attempting to move loads that are too heavy or awkward without assistance or mechanical aids.



## Twisting While Lifting

Rotating the spine while carrying or setting down a load places extreme stress on back muscles and discs.



## Reaching Far From the Body

Extended reaching reduces mechanical advantage and dramatically increases strain on the lower back.



## Poor Workstation Setup

Unsupported seating, improper monitor height, and awkward keyboard positions lead to chronic strain over time.



## Repetitive Motion

Repeated bending, pushing, pulling, or carrying — even with light loads — accumulates fatigue and injury risk.



## Slips, Trips & Falls

Clutter, cords, uneven footing, and poor housekeeping create conditions where a stumble can cause a serious strain or worse.



### Field Employees

Safe lifting, terrain awareness, and mechanical aids for physical tasks.



### Office Employees

Ergonomic workstation setup, posture habits, and movement throughout the day.



### Early Reporting

Recognize warning signs and report discomfort before it becomes a serious injury.

# Safe Work Practices Every Day, Every Task

Good body mechanics and a clean work environment are your two most powerful tools against strains and sprains. These practices apply whether you're on a job site or at a desk — and they should become second nature.

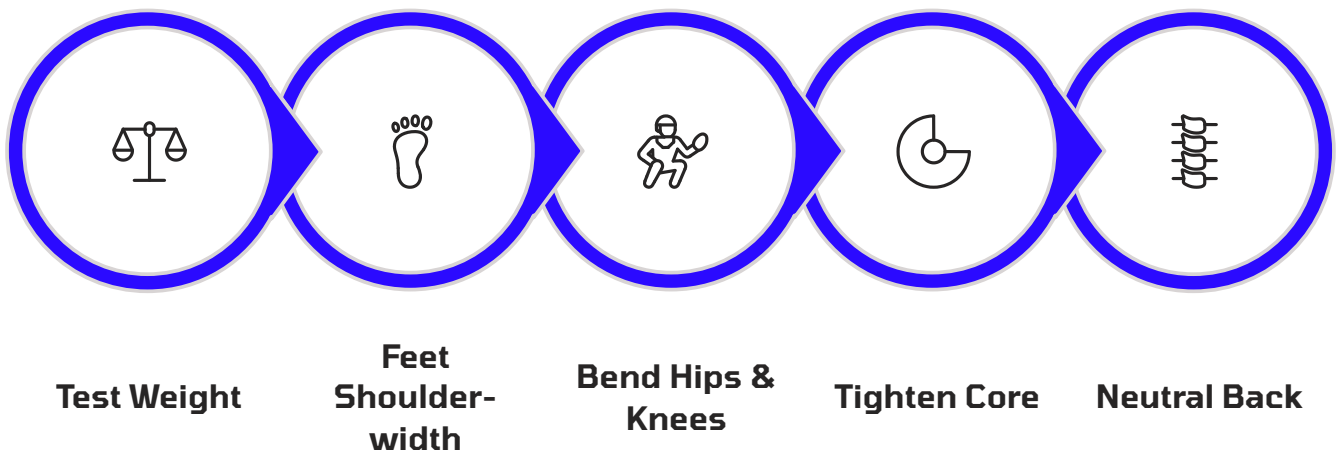
## Before You Move Anything

- Size up the load before moving it
- Ask for help or use carts, dollies, or lift-assist devices for heavy or awkward items
- Keep the load close to your body at all times
- Avoid twisting — turn with your feet instead
- Lift smoothly and do not jerk the load

## Your Environment & Posture

- Keep aisles, floors, and work areas clear of clutter and trip hazards
- Change position often — avoid staying in one posture too long
- Use team lifts for bulky or heavy items that can't be mechanically assisted
- Stage materials close to the task to reduce repeated carrying distance
- Take short recovery breaks during repetitive or sustained tasks

Proper lifting technique is one of the most important skills any employee can develop. Whether you're moving a box of files or a piece of field equipment, these nine steps protect your spine and reduce injury risk every time.



Never jerk or rush a lift. A smooth, controlled motion — with the load kept close to your center of gravity — is always safer than speed. When in doubt about the weight or awkwardness of a load, ask for help or use a mechanical aid.

# Field Employee Examples

Field work presents unique physical demands – uneven terrain, heavy materials, vehicle access, and sustained outdoor tasks all create elevated risk for strains and back injuries. The following examples show how to apply safe practices in common field scenarios.

**1**

## **Water, Tools & Materials**

Use a cart, dolly, or team lift when items are bulky or heavy. Never carry more than you can safely control.

**2**

## **Shoveling & Ground-Level Work**

Alternate tasks to avoid repetitive twisting. Take short recovery breaks to prevent cumulative fatigue.

**3**

## **Vehicle Work**

Avoid overreaching into truck beds. Bring the item closer to the edge before lifting to maintain proper form.

**4**

## **Uneven Terrain**

Watch your footing before carrying materials. A strain combined with a fall is far more serious than either alone.

**5**

## **Traffic Control & Utility Work**

Stage materials close to the task area to reduce repeated carrying distance and cumulative load on the back.

# Office Employee Examples

Office environments carry their own strain and sprain risks – from lifting boxes of files to hours of sustained sitting in a poorly adjusted workstation. These examples address the most common office scenarios and how to handle them safely.

**1**

## **Boxes of Paper or Files**

Do not lift and twist from the floor to a desk in one motion. Bring the load close to your body and move your feet to reposition before setting it down.

**2**

## **Under-Desk Reaching**

Avoid extended bending or twisting to plug in cords or retrieve items. Get down to the level of the task rather than reaching from a standing or seated position.

**3**

## **Computer Work**

Adjust your chair and monitor so your back is supported, shoulders are relaxed, and elbows are close to the body. Follow OSHA's Computer Workstations eTool guidance for neutral posture.

**4**

## **Long Sitting Periods**

Stand, stretch, and walk briefly throughout the day. Sustained static posture – even in a well-adjusted chair – increases muscle fatigue and injury risk over time.

**5**

## **Storage Rooms**

Use step stools or ladders when needed. Never overreach while lifting binders or boxes from high shelves – reposition yourself to keep the load close.

# Warning Signs: Report Early

Early reporting is one of the most important things an employee can do. A minor strain caught early can be treated quickly and simply. The same injury ignored for weeks can become a chronic, debilitating condition requiring extended time away from work. **If you experience any of the following symptoms, report them to your supervisor right away.**



## Back Pain

Any persistent or recurring pain in the lower, mid, or upper back during or after work tasks.



## Muscle Tightness

Stiffness or tightness in muscles that doesn't resolve with rest or movement.



## Sharp Pulling Sensation

A sudden or sharp pulling feeling during lifting, bending, or reaching movements.



## Numbness or Tingling

Any numbness, tingling, or radiating sensation in the back, hips, or limbs.



## Reduced Range of Motion

Difficulty bending, turning, or moving through a normal range without pain or restriction.



## Pain That Worsens

Discomfort that increases with lifting, bending, or prolonged sitting — a sign that the injury is progressing.

- Early reporting helps prevent a minor strain from becoming a more serious injury. Never wait to see if it gets better on its own.

# Supervisor Prevention Reminders

Supervisors play a critical role in preventing strains and sprains. By proactively reviewing tasks, maintaining a safe environment, and reinforcing a culture of early reporting, supervisors can significantly reduce the frequency and severity of musculoskeletal injuries on their teams.

## → **Review Tasks for Ergonomic Risk**

Regularly evaluate field and office tasks for awkward lifting, carrying, pushing, and pulling. Identify and address high-risk activities before injuries occur.

## → **Maintain Good Housekeeping**

Ensure walkways are clear, floors are clean, and storage areas are organized. Poor housekeeping is a leading contributor to slips, trips, and the strains that follow.

## → **Provide Mechanical Aids**

Make carts, dollies, lift-assist devices, and team lift protocols available and accessible. Remove barriers to using them.

## → **Encourage Breaks & Task Rotation**

Promote stretch breaks and task rotation where practical to reduce cumulative fatigue from repetitive or sustained postures.

## → **Reinforce Early Reporting**

Create an environment where employees feel comfortable reporting discomfort and near misses without fear of negative consequences. Early intervention saves time, money, and health.