

Looking for Signs of Work Related Back Problems

The first step in developing a back injury prevention program is to determine the magnitude of the problem. Some signs of a problem are obvious while others are more difficult to identify.

Type of Business

Certain types of business are more likely to have a high frequency of back injuries due to manual material handling exposures. These include moving and storage, warehousing, furniture stores, beverage distributors, construction and many other types of operations. Specific jobs or activities within other types of businesses are also at increased risk for back injuries. These include delivery staff, maintenance personnel, and anyone who lifts, handles or carries heavy objects.

Records

Keeping good records is important to understanding the magnitude of back injury problems in the workplace. The benefits of good records include:

- Identify departments, jobs or tasks that have higher back injury incidence rates
- Identify specific causes of back injuries
- Provide facts pertaining to the circumstances surrounding the accident causes
- Measure the effectiveness of controls in reducing the frequency and severity of back injuries

OSHA 300 Logs

The first place to look for signs that there is a potential for back related problems is on the OSHA 300 Log. These records indicate the type of each individual injury that occurs in the workplace but other useful information is also available. This includes:

- Date it occurred
- Job title
- Location where the injury occurred
- A description of the injury and the body part affected

In addition, the total number of days away from work or the times that workers were on restricted duty are also recorded. This is useful information in determining the severity of the injury.

Workers' Compensation Data

Another good source of statistical data concerning back injuries are the loss runs provided by QBE. The loss runs provide a list of injuries along with the injury costs.

Accident Investigation Data

Good accident investigation is crucial to the success of the Back Injury

Prevention Program. Without proper reporting and investigation, the true extent of the problem may not be evident. A good accident investigation identifies the root causes that contribute to the injury as well as identifies solutions to prevent the conditions that allowed the accident to happen from occurring again. A general accident investigation report should be used for investigating all accidents but a report that is specific to the investigation of back injuries will help to identify the specific factors that contributed to the causes of this type of injury.

Employee Complaints

Certain jobs or work conditions can cause worker complaints due to strain, fatigue, discomfort and pain. If there are jobs or departments where there are excessive numbers of employee complaints, these can be areas where the potential for back injury is higher. Excessive turnover in a specific job can also be an indicator that the job has significant risk factors. Ask the employees which jobs they dislike to perform the most. Often these jobs have the most severe risk factors for back injuries. Other red flags for potential problems with severe manual material handling exposures include poor productivity and frequent absenteeism.

Symptom Surveys

Employers should be encouraged to report pain and discomfort before more severe injury occurs. Early intervention at the first signs of a problem can prevent or minimize injury. A symptom survey is a proactive approach to analyzing jobs with the potential for causing injury. The survey allows employees to report the location, frequency and duration of discomfort. Body diagrams can also help facilitate information gathering. Reports of similar pain or discomfort by a number of workers performing the same job are a good indicator that there is a problem.