

Shouldn't have done that!

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For anyone who has suffered a back injury, you know how debilitating that can be. And you also know that back injuries can occur anywhere: at work or at home. According to the Air Force Safety Center's FY15 Stakeholder's Report, back injuries are the third leading body part injury category for Air Force personnel. The report also says that in the last five years there were over 3,100 such injuries in the AF. Of course, those are just the ones that have been reported, investigated and recorded in the Air Force Safety Automation System by a safety professional. No doubt, there are thousands more that occur but are only recorded at the installation level.

The majority of all back injuries are due to overexertion and improper lifting. Whatever job you do, chances are lifting is required at some time. Many routine daily tasks can cause a lifting injury. Some examples are: an office worker that carries a box of paper; maintenance personnel on the flight line that are required to move a toolbox; or an Airman required to lift a hospital patient in a medical facility.

In many instances, back injuries can be prevented with the use of a lifting device or a "lift team." When the same type of back injury occurs repeatedly, measures to prevent reoccurrence require a query into the type of lifting necessary, how often that lifting occurs and what you are lifting. For example, if you're lifting medical patients 5-10 times a day, your unit may need to invest in a device that assists in lifting patients.

Many career fields, such as aircraft maintenance, vehicle maintenance and logistics, have similar lifting tasks that would also benefit from the use of lifting devices, e.g., to assist lifting aircraft seats or vehicle engines. There are many devices available for injury prevention when you perform lifting tasks. These vary in cost and weight capacity, as well as capability. When lifting devices aren't practical or feasible, team lifting is the preferred method. Particularly if the object weighs more than 25 pounds and is in an awkward position or location. There may be times when slings, hoists or even a forklift are ideal to lift an object. Ensure personnel that use these devices are trained and the device has been inspected in accordance with manufacturer's requirements prior to use.

A recent mishap highlights how important the use of a lift device can be. Six civilian workers were tasked with removing 50 cardio fitness exercise machines from a tractor-trailer into a fitness facility. Each machine weighed approximately 200 pounds and the distance to move each machine into the facility was 50 yards. Also, each machine had to be taken down from the tractor trailer to the ground before it was carried the 50 yards. All of this work was accomplished manually. One worker injured their lower back badly enough to have lost multiple days from work. It would be safe to assume that other workers felt discomfort, but didn't seek medical attention. The mishap investigator asked about the use of a lifting device but discovered none was readily available. In this example, a forklift would be the ideal process to lift the equipment. Even if the forklift was unable to go into the facility, it could at least be used to move the machines to the door. If a forklift was not available, perhaps the use of slings to assist in the carrying of each machine would prevent a mishap. Of course, contributing factors to an injury

that are unknown include the physical condition of the individual (although, in this case, according to the report, they did not have any prior back injuries) which is very important. The bottom line is that any time you are lifting, consider alternative methods prior to accomplishing the task.

Proper equipment, training and the use of Real-Time Risk Management for daily tasks can prevent many mishaps. Real-Time Risk Management offers the opportunity to address issues that arise at the time of the task. The risk can be mitigated immediately and can then be implemented to reduce the risk of injury.

Be smart and lift smart. Your back will thank you later.