



## Guest Perspective

### The economics of back pain

Is it time to implement  
a healthy back program?



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At one point or another in your lifetime, you likely will experience some form of back pain. The Journal of Industrial Medicine reports that more than 22 million Americans experience back pain lasting at least one week in a given year. Employers may be feeling this pain as well. It starts with missed workdays, which can lead to a loss in productivity and an impact to the bottom line.

Back pain is the second leading cause of missed workdays, which equates to 40 percent of all absences or 83 million workdays. According to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, back pain is the most costly healthcare problem in the workplace other than the common cold. The United States is not alone. Many countries around the world are recognizing the impact of back pain on the economy and are launching awareness programs to educate workers on preventative measure to keep their backs healthy.

and controlling the risk factors that might strain workers' bodies.

Additionally, consider the following ideas from the American Pain Foundation:

- Adopt a philosophy of health and wellness. Promote this philosophy to employees, and stress the importance of proper exercise and taking small breaks throughout the day.
- Communicate with employees regularly on workplace safety. Let them know it's okay to share workplace concerns.
- Provide education and training. If employees are among those at higher risk for back pain or injury, it's important to provide information and training on ways to keep their backs healthy.
- Consider planning health fairs onsite as a resource for employees.
- Investigate the benefits of offering health club memberships as an incentive or a means to reduce health insurance premium costs to your employees.

## Institute a Healthy Back Program

There are four work-related factors that are associated with increased risk of back pain and injury including

- applying too much force,
- repetitive tasks,
- poor posture and
- too much stress.

Some jobs increase the risk of back pain, for example nursing and construction. However, even individuals who work at a desk all day are at risk.

Employers have a responsibility under health and safety laws to provide a safe workplace for their employees. You don't have to subscribe to a formal program, but there are some ideas and tips to keep you and your employees safe and healthy.

If your employees have physical jobs, then ask them to pay attention to the way they move their bodies. Advise them to let their legs do the work - never bend and lift with their back. It's important to keep objects close to the body when lifting to utilize core muscles. If your employees are in an office environment, then pay attention to the set-up of the workspace, taking into consideration ergonomics. Ergonomics is the science of making sure that workplace conditions and equipment - such as desks, lighting and uniforms - fit the worker. These principles can help prevent work-related back strains and injury by identifying

■ Encourage group walks before or after work or during lunch hour. It's a great way to boost morale too.

■ Invest in proper equipment and technologies to create a safer workplace. If a job requires employees to stand for the majority of the day, invest in anti-fatigue mats to help support their backs. Use ergonomically friendly office equipment for those whose spines might be affected from sitting in the same positions for a long time each day.

Safety representatives or occupational therapists can help you assess work conditions and provide ideas to improve health and safety. Occupational therapists can perform job site analysis and make recommendations on improvements.

As an employer, it is important to identify and reduce employees' exposure to hazards in the workplace. By training and engaging employees in their own safety, you can reduce the occurrence of workplace injuries, increase employee productivity and morale, and lower workers' compensation costs.

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*The views expressed are Dr. Sliva's and do not necessarily represent those of the Rockford Chamber of Commerce.*