WEEK 35 AUGUST · ~5 MIN READ · ONTARIO CONSTRUCTION

Manual Material Handling & Back Safety

It's rarely one heroic lift. It's the hundredth bag of mortar, moved the same awkward way, that finally does it — and by then the damage has been building for months.

The hazard

Lifting, carrying, twisting, and reaching all load your spine, and the load adds up across a shift rather than arriving all at once. Heavy or awkward objects, bending from the waist, twisting under load, and lifting from the floor or above the shoulders are the worst combinations. Once a back is hurt it tends to be a recurring problem, which is why the goal is to design the lifting out rather than to lift more carefully.

What to do

- **Change the job before you change your technique.** Can it be delivered closer, split into smaller loads, stored at waist height, moved on a cart or dolly, or lifted with a machine? Every one of those beats a better lift.
- **Size it up first.** Weight, shape, grip, where it's going, and what's in the way. If it's awkward or too heavy, get a hand or get equipment — and decide that before you're holding it.
- **Clear the route before you pick anything up.** Most of the bad moments happen on the walk, not the lift.
- **Keep a neutral spine, the load close, and let your legs do the work.** Move your feet to turn — **never twist while loaded.** "Back straight, lift with your legs" is a slogan; the useful part is keeping the load close and not rotating under it.
- **Team lifts need a leader.** One person calls the lift, the set-down, and the pace. Mismatched heights and mismatched timing are how team lifts hurt people.
- **Set heavy things down at waist height** where you can, so the next person isn't lifting off the ground.
- **Look at the repeat jobs.** If a task happens fifty times a day, small improvements to storage height, route, and rotation are worth more than anything you do on a single lift.

Watch out for

- Bending and twisting at the same time.
- "I've got it" on a load that plainly needs two people or a machine.
- The same lift repeated all day with no break and no change to the setup.
- Awkward more than heavy — a light, bulky, or shifting load can be worse than a compact heavy one.

Talk it over

- What's the heaviest or most awkward thing we're moving today, and how do we do it without carrying it by hand?
- Which repeated lift on this job could be fixed with a cart, a different storage height, or a delivery to the point of use?

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