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Tackling Ergonomics in Construction

As a safety professional, are you spending a third of your time addressing ergonomic issues on your job sites? That was the question I asked at the ASSP Construction Practice Specialty group during a presentation earlier this month. Even though over 35% of all lost time injuries in construction are strain and over-exertion injuries, no one in the audience responded to my question with a resounding “YES”.

So why do organizations, particularly contractors, spend so little time addressing the leading source of injuries. I think there are a couple of reasons. One, there is no regulatory requirement. Nothing in the OSHA standard (other than the General Duty Clause) references ergonomics or strain injury prevention. Second, it is not easy. Addressing the source of soft tissue injuries can be difficult and takes a significant amount of time and cooperation, but it is worth the effort. So rather than throwing up our hands and punting, let's look at some potential options to address this exposure.

Design with the Worker in Mind

Review all job tasks requiring material handling and the risk of muscle strains. Identify high risk job tasks and look for solutions for proper work station / job task design that can improve efficiencies and reduce the risk of injury.



Evaluating and addressing strain related exposures should be a key part of any safety program.

Taking the time to improve your ergonomic injury prevention program can have a positive impact on your injury rates and safety performance.

Educate supervisors and field staff

Educate staff not only on proper lifting techniques, but the mechanics of the back and how it works. Review what actions create greater risk and how working in a “neutral position” can greatly improve strength and reduce risk.

Observations in the field

Follow-up the education with field observations looking for opportunities to coach proper work habits and correcting the bad habits to reduce the risk of injury in the future. This is the only way to ensure that the education is actually being applied on the job.

Update Job Site Inspection forms

If you have not already done so, update your job site inspections and forms to include exposures and behaviors that lead to strain related injuries. Focus on behaviors that lead to unsafe acts like bending, reaching or twisting while performing material handling tasks or using the correct tool for the job.

Quality accident investigations

Strain injuries are often the most neglected when it comes to a thorough accident cause and prevention analysis. All claims, and in particular strain related incidents should have a detailed look at what really caused the accident. The analysis should explore not just the person was lifting wrong, but why were they lifting wrong and a detailed look at what steps can be taken to prevent the same type of incident. Avoid “training” as the solution to all ergonomic injuries as this simply does not provide a long term remedy to prevent others from getting hurt.

Again, look at what really caused the injury and what specific things that could have been done, and can be done in the future to prevent a reoccurrence of the same type incident.

Implement a stretching and exercise program

This does not need to be elaborate, but getting field staff to limber up before manually intensive tasks can greatly reduce the potential for muscle strains. Extensions are one of the best exercises for back health and should be incorporated into daily stretching program. Search “McKenzie Method” exercises for resources.

These are just a few basic steps that can help tackle the leading source of lost time injuries on your job sites. There are plenty of other resources that can be helpful including the following:

- ANSI/ASSP A10.40-2007 (R2018) Reduction Of Musculoskeletal Problems In Construction <https://webstore.ansi.org/standards/asse/ansiaspa10402007r2018>
Step by step process for addressing ergonomic injuries in construction.
- The Center for Construction Research & Training (<https://www.cpwr.com/>)
Good resource and training aids (including an upcoming webinar)
- NIOSH (<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2007-122/default.html>)
Good simple solutions for injury prevention.
- OSHA (https://www.osha.gov/dts/osta/otm/otm_vii/otm_vii_1.html)
Even though there are no standards related to ergonomics, there are some good resources available.

If you have questions about ergonomics or other risk management issues, please drop me a note or call and I will be glad to assist.

Thanks,
Mark

For more information about Construction Ergonomics and other solutions from Marsh Wortham, contact your local representative or:

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