Controls in Place so Back Injuries Aren't the Case

Back injuries in the workplace are not only frequent and severe, but they are the cause of one-fourth of all work-related compensation claims. As the leader in loss-time claims, back injuries cost billions of dollars annually. Nationwide, one out of every five work-related injuries is a back injury. Most of the injuries are to the lower back, caused by some form of lifting, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Naturally, the frequency, duration, and type of lifting are integral factors impacting an employee injury. However, these injuries can be avoided. By using administrative and engineering controls, the frequency of back injuries can be greatly reduced.

Any process that drastically limits exposure by control or manipulation of the work schedule or way in which work is performed is considered an administrative control. With any new employee, training is an extremely important administrative control. Employee lift training should include: how to ensure a secure hold, lifts using both hands if possible, use of an even motion, the importance of holding a load close to the body, a step to the side instead of twisting and the importance of breaks. Another administrative control is strength testing workers. Employees should be encouraged to only lift materials that match their strength. According to one study documented by the U.S Department of Labor, discouraging employees to refrain from lifting materials exceeding their strength capacity prevented up to one-third of back related injuries. It is also beneficial for employers to support physical fitness or stretching programs to further decrease the hazard of back injuries.

In addition to administrative controls, employers should utilize engineering controls. Engineering controls make physical changes to a job to manage risk exposures. Decreasing the size or heaviness of the material being lifted is an effective engineering control. Ensuring material packages are stable, compact, and have lifting handles should become a routine process. If the loads are unstable, employees should know to repack the load or label as unstable. Aside from lifting, injuries often occur when employees are reaching and bending for materials. By modifying the height location of the materials being stored injuries can be avoided. Lastly, employers should use mechanical aids like pneumatic lifts, conveyors, or automated materials handling equipment to assist in lifting heavy or bulky loads.

The safety of employees should be the number one concern of all employers. Employers and employees benefit from implementing controls. The controls should be administrative such as training, strength testing, and encouraging physical fitness and stretching programs. Engineering controls should also be in place to prevent injuries through processes like redistributing weight of material loads, relocating storage of materials, and using alternative manual lifting sources. By putting controls into place back injuries can be prevented.

For more information about back injury prevention, please call RiskControl360°'s Lisa Shaver, at (877) 360-3608, ext. 2367.