

PREVENT SPRAINS AND STRAINS

Using your head can prevent many injuries.

Sprains and strains can occur anywhere – in the workplace, during recreational and sporting events, and at home. If we understand what causes them, we are better equipped to prevent them. When doctors talk of sprains and strains, they speak of ligaments and tendons.

Ligaments are tough, fibrous, cord-like materials that connect bone to bone. Ligaments most commonly are associated with joints, with one bone connecting to another – at the elbow where the forearm is joined to the upper arm, at the knee, at the shoulder, at the wrist, at the hip. Wherever there is a joint, you'll find ligaments. Tendons are of similar material, but their function is to attach muscle to bone.

Muscles of motion are almost always found in pairs, and usually cross the joints of bones. When one muscle contracts to move a part of the body, its partner relaxes. Because they are balanced, each tries to overcome the other's resistance without success, and this "ties you up in knots." When a muscle is stretched too much, the ligaments pull and sometimes even tear. Stretched ligaments and tendons are termed strains. A sprain is when tearing has occurred.

This background information will help you understand why sprains and strains happen. You probably all know about sprained ankles and strained elbows, but the back is an area where strains and sprains often occur. Back sprains and strains are also the most costly to the individual.

The industrial setting provides many opportunities for the occurrence of sprains and strains; the most common is material handling. We all handle material in one way or another. Even the office worker is involved with material handling when picking up a package, box or chair to move it.

Checklist

1. Before you begin, size up the job. Is there a better way? Look into ways to eliminate or reduce lifting, lowering, pushing, pulling and carrying whenever possible.
2. Get help when the load is heavy, awkward or unstable.
3. Make sure there are no slipping or tripping hazards in your work area or around your home. The sudden jerk caused by a slip or trip can cause a sprain or strain.
4. Don't overextend yourself – use a step stool or ladder when lifting above shoulder height.
5. Try to keep yourself in good condition.
6. Take a lesson from athletes – don't rush into a job cold. Warm up your muscles first.
7. Hold the load close.
8. Avoid twisting your body while handling a load. Work smarter, not harder – it's easier and safer.

Thought Provokers

1. What areas of your job have the potential for sprains or strains?
2. What can you do to minimize the chance for these injuries?
3. Are there any specific points or problems you wish to discuss?