

Back Injury Avoidance

KEY POINTS

- When working with farm wagons, lift the tongue with your legs, not your back.
- Get help when moving irrigation pipe or equipment.
- Limit the weight of loads to be lifted.
- Don't twist with the load.
- Don't reach or extend oneself to lift an object.
- Dismount all equipment carefully. Jumping off a tractor after sitting for long periods of time is dangerous.

Over 70,000 people a year experience back injuries and describe them as the most costly and painful accidents of their lives. The Western Farm Association reported that lifting injuries were the most common injury to the agricultural worker. This experience also showed that the low back is the most frequently injured part of the body. Strains and sprains were by far the leading disabling injury to farm workers.

Training can impact improper lifting, a major element in back injuries, and safety engineering can eliminate many other causes. However, it won't be enough unless the farm worker uses common sense on the job.

Management should also evaluate those work areas that have the greatest frequency of back injuries. Are there tasks which have a high incidence of injury to the lower back? If a certain task creates problems, ergonomic principles may be applied. Perhaps the problem can be engineered out through the reduction of the weight to be lifted, partial automation or the use

of material handling equipment. Even after this has been done, it is important to train the farm worker in the hazards associated with manual lifting in the workplace.

The following tips might help avoid a painful and costly back injury:

1. When working with farm wagons, lift the tongue using your legs, not your back. Also, use a stand to keep the tongue more in line with the hitch.
2. When moving irrigation pipe or equipment, make sure of the weight and position of the equipment before attempting the job alone. Better to take the time to use the help of another farm hand on the job rather than suffer a back injury by trying to hurry. Lifting and moving irrigation pipe, particularly mainline, is one of the most common sources of back injuries to farm workers.
3. Limit the weight of loads to be lifted. Items that need moving by manual lift should not weight more than 50 lbs., preferably 25 lbs. No farm worker should attempt to lift a 100 lb. weight without assistance.
4. Don't twist with the load. Farm workers are involved in moving containers of harvested fruits and vegetables. Proper lifting techniques teach workers to bend their knees and pick the load up carefully. However, many farm workers make the mistake of twisting with the load — this can put additional strain on the back, and may lead to an injury.
5. Don't reach or extend oneself to lift an object. Leaning to lift even a relatively light object, without support, can cause a back injury. Take the time to get close in for a proper manual lift.

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6. Don't jump off a tractor, especially after sitting for a long period of time. Sitting is more stressful for the back than standing or walking. After the back has been in a sitting or resting position for a period of time, it is not "ready" for the jolt that accompanies a leap or jump to the ground from the driver's seat of a tractor.

Remember — farm workers should also use safe lifting practices at home and during recreational activities. It doesn't do much good to practice safety all week at the workplace, only to injure one's back while performing daily activities at home.