

A Letter from Home

A NEWSLETTER FOR CAREGIVERS

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PROTECT YOURSELF FROM INJURY

All direct care providers who lift or move clients or other household items are at risk for back and other musculoskeletal injuries. A work-related musculoskeletal disorder is an injury of the muscles, tendons, ligaments, nerves, joints, cartilage, bones, or blood vessels in the extremities or back that is caused or aggravated by work tasks such as lifting, pushing, and pulling.¹ In the US, the lost time injury rate for home care workers is nearly four times higher than the average for all occupations. The average home care worker injury results in a median of 10 days away from work, with almost a third (28.1%) requiring 31 days or more away from work.³ Sprains and strains were the most common lost work time injuries.

Forty-two percent of sprains, strains, and tears were the result of overexertion. Overexertion means performing the same movements repeatedly, which puts stress on the body. Bending, reaching, and twisting actions accounted for another 22 percent of injuries.¹ Muscle is the

most common source of back pain and is often damaged by strenuous movement that is sudden or unfamiliar. This straining is even more likely if the muscle lacks strength, is tight and tense, and is tired due to repetitive movement or position that is held too long.¹ Sometimes the pain is the result of an injured disc. If the spine becomes strained or compressed, a disc may be damaged and can cause pain. An unexpected twist can damage

ligaments, and can cause the joint to become irritated and the muscles to spasm. Awkward posture can also put excess strain on the joints making them more likely to become irritated and cause spasm.¹

Although home care workers perform many of the same tasks as acute care workers, they have 25% higher injury rate.³ This difference is probably due to the fact that home care workers



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often work alone with no assistance and limited on-site supervision. In addition, the home care environment is generally not under the control of the home care worker or their agency. One of the reasons that back injuries in particular occur more commonly in the home care environment is because the homes of many clients have too many obstructions and have limited space to move and twist in order to keep proper body posture. Rooms in client's homes are often crowded with poor arrangement of furniture and do not allow enough room to maneuver, particularly around their bed. Many of the client bathrooms, too, are not designed to allow room for easy transfers. Patterns in injury data showed that homecare workers were at particular risk for back, shoulder and knee injuries while transferring clients or moving household objects.¹ Also, home care workers often feel too burdened with too many tasks to accomplish and feel pressure from clients to provide extra services.³ As a result, they may not be as attentive to proper body mechanics.

Incorrectly performed actions or tasks can also cause or contribute to increased risk of injury. To minimize your risk of injury avoid:

- Reaching and lifting loads too far from your body
- Tasks which require high repetition and use of the same set of muscles
- Lifting heavy loads greater than 40-50 pounds
- Twisting while lifting
- Using excessive force whether lifting, pushing or pulling
- Reaching low or high to begin lifting
- Improper posture while sitting, standing, or lifting

Finally, client characteristics can contribute to the risk of injury. Assisting totally dependent, unpredictable or combative clients can contribute to injury because you must be prepared to lift more weight than is recommended. Home care providers must observe these types of clients closely to determine if they are likely to move or shift suddenly during a lift or transfer. If it is determined that the client is too unreliable or unsafe to move, additional help is required to keep both the client and you safe.

Reduce Injuries

One of the primary methods to reduce musculoskeletal injuries while providing care is to develop proper posture. Your spine has natural curves; one in the neck, one in the middle back, and one low in the back. When moving or lifting, it is important to maintain these curves with proper posture. To maintain good posture, support the spine along its curve while sitting or driving, using a small pillow for low back support if needed. Your body posture, even at rest, can contribute to injury. To reduce awkward postures, bend at the knees and not your back to lift. Move your feet instead of twisting to move items.

Tasks that require forceful exertions place higher loads on the muscles, discs, ligaments and joints and can lead to fatigue and injury. To reduce overexertion, divide the load when possible and push rather than lift. Also, if you can set something down on a table or other elevated surface instead of on the floor, do it so that you won't have to reach down to pick it up again. The best zone for lifting

is between your shoulders and your waist. Put heavier objects on shelves at waist level, lighter objects on lower or higher shelves.

Safe lifting technique is critical to your safety. Before lifting anything, always plan your lift and size up the load. Establish a wide stance, with your feet about shoulder's width apart (about 12 inches) and one foot slightly in front of the other. With the load close to your body, bend your knees and use the strong muscles of your thighs to lift steadily. The larger, stronger leg muscles are better equipped to do the lifting than the low-back muscles. Remember to tighten up the stomach and bend down with your legs. To avoid rotating your spine, make sure one foot is in the direction you are moving.

Whenever possible, devices should be used to help with patient transfers. Various devices such as draw sheets, slide boards, rollers, slings, gait belts, and mechanical lifts can assist in minimizing musculoskeletal injuries. Also, equipment such as adjustable beds, raised toilet seats, shower chairs, and grab bars are helpful for reducing risk factors. Encourage the client to participate as much as possible; this helps the client to maintain muscle strength and eases your burden as well.

You can minimize and prevent back pain with stretches that make the muscles in your back, stomach, hips and thighs flexible and strong. Maintaining an optimal weight will also reduce your risk of musculoskeletal injury by reducing the burden on the back. Smoking and stress may also be factors in back injury. When stress causes you to become distracted, you are more likely to neglect safety. It is critical that you know and follow your agency's lifting and ambulation policies. If you have any questions regarding your safety or your client's safety, talk to your supervisor. Report the first signs of pain and symptoms of a potential injury as soon as possible.

It is far easier to prevent injuries than it is to fix them after they occur. It is important to use good body mechanics and maintain healthy life-style habits to help prevent injury. The nature of caregiving can cause great physical stress on you as the caregiver. Practicing proper body mechanics will decrease the stress and strain and help to safely manage the client and his environment.

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Poor technique



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Proper technique

