During the past five years, ergonomic injuries represented 27% of the total dollars spent by our insurance companies on workers’ compensation claims. Our risk consultant has provided preventative measures for the common causes of back injuries, which are some of the most costly and debilitating employee injuries at veterinary practices.

Preventing Back Injuries

Ergonomic injuries are generally more expensive and debilitating than bites and scratches, especially if they involve the back, because they often involve damage to the body’s soft tissue. Rather than first-aid, stitches, or topical ointments, ergonomic injuries frequently require non-invasive medical testing such as x-rays and MRIs. Treatment could involve pain medication and physical therapy. An employee is more likely to miss time from work after sustaining an ergonomic injury than a bite or scratch. Higher medical costs and wage replacements escalate the total cost of ergonomic claims. This edition of Safety Bulletin will discuss common causes of back injuries and preventative measures.

Lifting Patients and Equipment

Before lifting a heavy object (patient or equipment), plan ahead. This will minimize risks that could lead to a back injury. Organize and clean the area that you will be lifting from. Move obstacles out of the way and

Continued on page two
Cumulative Trauma Disorders (CTDs)

Repetitive motion over time causes cumulative trauma disorders and can involve the muscles, ligaments, and joints. CTDs are the result of multiple minor strains versus one significant event or impact. People often perform similar motions of bending, twisting, and reaching at home as they do at work. When symptoms arise, they are often ignored. Early identification of CTDs can lead a person to use proper form and prevent further damage.

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ACTION TIP! Proper lifting techniques should be reviewed every year. With the physical demands of working at a veterinary practice, make this a priority during your team safety meetings.

ensure the floor is free of hazards.
Examine the area you intend to place the object. Make sure there is a clear space to set it down. Test the weight of the object. Determine if you can lift it by yourself, or if assistance is necessary. Consider asking for help, or using equipment to minimize the strain on your back whenever possible.

When you are ready to lift the object:
✓ Straighten your back with your feet shoulder-width apart
✓ Point your toes slightly outward to create a more stable base
✓ Position your body close to the object
✓ Tighten your abdomen—this will help protect your back
✓ Squat down to the floor while bending at your knees and hips
✓ Make sure to keep your back straight
✓ Keep your head and shoulders upright
✓ Place your hands on diagonally opposite corners of the object, and grip your hands firmly
✓ Bring the object as close to your body as you can
✓ Keep your arms and elbows tucked in
✓ Lift the object with power from your legs, not from your back

When you have lifted the object, take small steps while moving. Do not twist while holding the object—pivot your feet to the direction you want to go. When you are ready to lower the object, do it slowly. Place part of the object on the ledge of the surface and slide the object into position. Watch your fingers to ensure you have clearance—avoid pinching them.

Other Control Measures
Aside from following proper lifting techniques, there are other ways to prevent wear and tear on your back. Employees should be required to seek assistance—a “team-lift”—when an object is known to weigh more than a predetermined limit for one person. If the practice has an automatic lift table, make sure employees use it for heavy patients. Eliminating the need to bend over and lift the patient can prevent back injuries. If you find the need to move patients from room to room, ensure you have a lift table on wheels or a gurney that allows for easy transport of immobile patients. When you need to move heavy equipment or supplies, use a wheeled cart rather than carrying an object from one location to another.

Sitting and Standing
Many people believe back injuries are only caused by the strains of lifting. Poor sitting and standing posture can lead to severe back injuries over time. When sitting at a computer or workstation, keep your head directly over your shoulders. Avoid leaning forward or slouching in the chair. Sit with your back against the backrest to support your lower back. Adjust the height of your chair so your knees are at the same level as your hips. Sit close to your computer or workstation so you don’t have to extend your arms to type or write.

Whether performing a long surgery or grooming patients all day, there are many reasons an employee will stand for a long period of time. When doing so, keep your head directly over your shoulders. Relax your shoulders and allow your spine to form its natural “S” curve. Keep your feet at least a foot apart and distribute your weight evenly between them. Consider placing one foot on a small stool to relieve stress from time to time, changing sides frequently. Whenever possible, move around with small steps. Consider using anti-fatigue floor mats. These soft and cushioned mats provide relief to your heels and lower back.

Conclusion
There are many ways to sustain a back injury while working at a veterinary practice. From improper lifting technique to awkward standing postures, your back endures trauma every day. Unfortunately, strain on the back doesn’t start or stop at work. The position you sit in your car, your diet and exercise habits, and even your sleep posture all affect the trauma your back endures during your life. Follow these guidelines for lifting, sitting, and standing to keep your back happy and healthy.

Produced by: HUB International Midwest Limited, HUB International Midwest Insurance Agency (CA), PLIT Broker and Consultant since 1962
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